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**On God, Grandeur, and History:
an Early-Career Treatise on the American Theater, Interrupted**

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**On God, Grandeur, and History:
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by

Nicholas Kaidoo

Thesis

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Dedication

For my mom

*who made me believe that there was hope for me yet
yesterday*

For my niece

*who made me believe that there was hope for me yet
tomorrow*

and for the both of them

*who made me believe that there remains hope for me yet
today,
as long as I buy myself enough tomorrows.*

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To all of the people here listed, I shall remain forever grateful.

Abstract

On God, Grandeur, and History: an Early-Career Treatise on the American Theater, Interrupted

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A reflection on the ritual presentation of narrative-based theater, the theater's aspiration to community-building, and the ways in which I've worked to incorporate those aspirations into my playwriting.

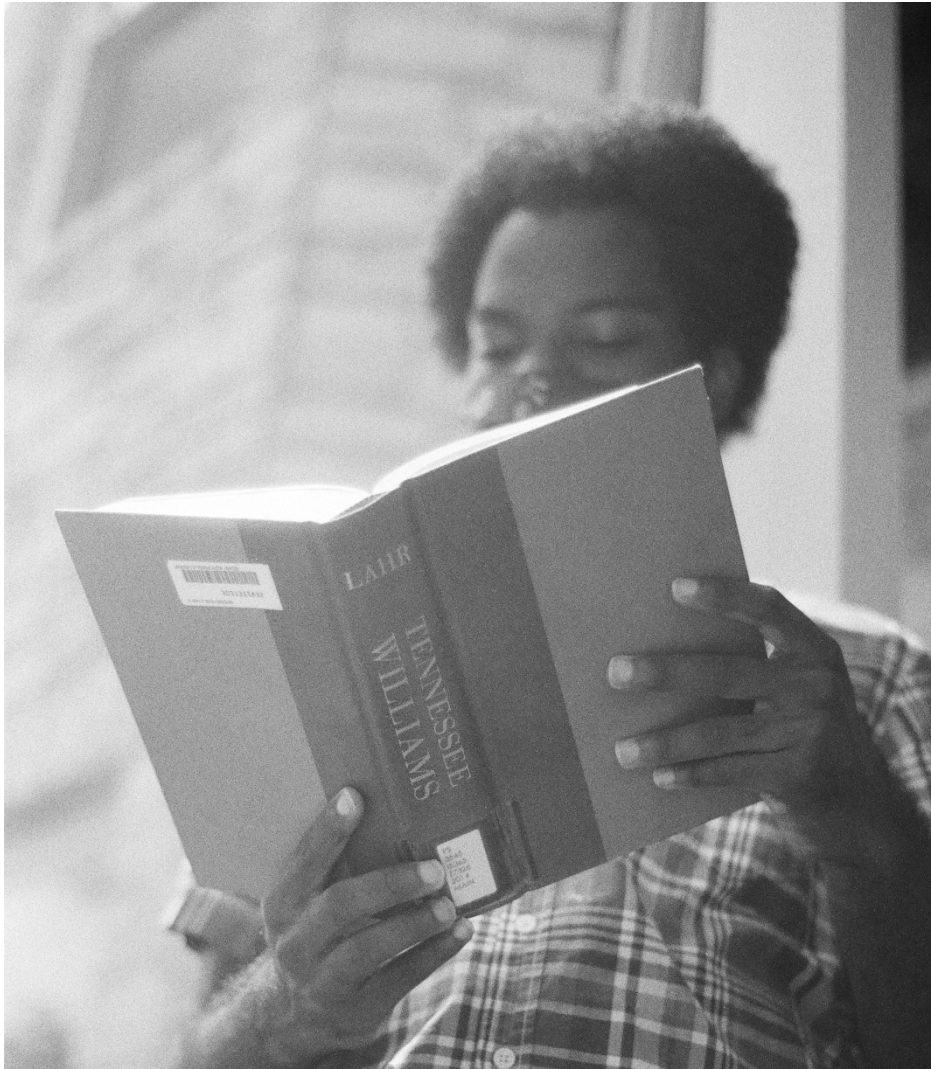
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0. An Ode to Tennessee



*photographs
provided courtesy
of Justine Gelfman*

1. Introduction

“History is time that won’t quit.”

- Suzan-Lori Parks,
“Elements of Style” (1995)

“I didn’t want to be a writer; I wanted to be a reader. [...] I wrote what became part of *The Bluest Eye*. Years later when I lived in Syracuse and didn’t have anyone to talk to, I wrote it as a way to talk. [...] You write when your back is pressed against the wall. There’s nobody around, and you must trust your own instincts, rely on your resources and declare yourself competent whether you are or not.”

- Toni Morrison,
“I Will Always be a Writer” intv. by Jessica Harris
featured in *Essence* (Dec. 1976)

Walter Benjamin’s Angelus Novus crashes through the ceiling at the end of *Millennium Approaches* and briefly converts the vague ritualism of the American theater into something self-aware of its own dormant, internalized religiosities. This third act button is a liturgical rite: awe-aspiring and when experienced in earnest, inarticulable. My present thesis inherits a similar liturgical skeleton; it’s a kind of half-embodied requiem. Sitting with these pages and thoughts feels so deeply like an elegiac act that it’s hard to appreciate the resuscitative ambitions behind their writing: what of my authorial ambitions can I rescue inside of a form that is on both a literal and an existential hiatus? The form is so far from the version of itself that framed for us Kushner’s trumpeting opus. Any angel—even Benjamin’s “Angel of History”—defies resuscitation. An angel is presumably content inside of a way of being that exceeds humanity. And yet, this Angel of History is the only extant American angel left and it is propelled

backward—caught inexorably in the winds of progress or so both Benjamin and Kushner would allege—through the events of *Perestroika*; witnessing history as it occurs, continually and consistently compounding upon itself. By the time the Angel and Prior confront one another in Heaven, history is relentless—apparently manipulated at the mercy of powerful men—and God is gone. What, then, is the job of me as writer under duress of both broad and individual circumstance? With my back against the wall, in my own Morrisonian Syracuse of sorts, I feel compelled to make manifest what little semblance of “God” we have left as a culture.

In the spirit of “requiem,” I think we should bury whatever ideas of God we have as some single man sitting on a cloud – I’m disinterested in the pathologies of personifying one’s deity to resemble oneself (especially if that personification qualifies that deity as being fundamentally and temperamentally human-like). The cultural predominance of an Anglo-, Abrahamic God is just one of many reasons why the contemporary trend toward social, cultural (and maybe most importantly, economic) capital being placed upon selfhood—or at least as much of selfhood as can be contained inside of identity—rings differently across different identities. If indeed the theater is a ritual in service of an as yet unidentified God, I would offer that the God that the contemporary theater exists in service to is community.

At all times, simultaneously, there exists civic history and there exists cultural history: a narrativized amalgamation of different communities across time. Their simultaneity, here defined however, does not imply that these two branches of history are isolated from one another. I isolate them to suggest that we as spectator are predisposed to appreciate our presence inside of an ongoing cultural history more readily and more immediately than we are to appreciate our presence inside of an ongoing civic history. But rather than merely being related, these two histories define one another. The greatest aid that the writer can offer for a reader-spectator, then,

in an effort to help the reader-spectator appreciate their presence inside of a civic history is the perspective of collectivism—the sheer knowledge of numbers. When Hamlet dies and Fortinbras takes the crown, when Nora shuts the door on her dollhouse, when the Walters leave their home for their new neighborhood, we are all asking similar questions of ourselves and the societies we sit inside of. And this similarity of inquiry is the fundamental effect—and the ultimate evaluative measure—of Great Work; precisely the kind of Great Work that the Angel of History invites us toward at the end of *Millennium*.

2. On Structure

In defining the shape of my thesis, I've elected to include one play from each of my three years of graduate study. I might refer offhandedly to other plays since it feels like all fourteen-some-odd plays I've written in my time here are essentially entangled with one another. But I'll work to make order—and structure—from the mess. The three plays that I'll explicitly cite are:

PLANTATIONLAND (First Draft: Feb. 2019)

Fall the House (First Draft: Sep./Oct. 2019)

Sycamore (First Draft: Nov. 2020)

all of which will be amended to this document immediately following my conclusion. In the individual section about each play, I'll reflect on the authorial process of that respective play and how the writing of it accommodates a desire to maintain sensational hugeness while also inviting the “God” of community into the ritual as designed. Preceding discussion of the plays, however, as has felt appropriate: I've offered an introduction to the ideas that will thread through my entire thesis. Immediately following, I will offer a brief consideration about the mechanical act of seeing in the theater and an essential definition of style that I will allude back to throughout my reflection on each of the three aforementioned plays.

3. On Seeing

There are (at least) two omnipresent acts of seeing in every play made—seeing as maker vs. seeing as spectator. They necessitate two separate acts of translation: the author renders thoughts that are abstract into literalized lines and images (*translation #1*) and then the spectator reads those literalized lines/images and converts them into something abstract (*translation #2*). It follows that the play exists empirically as an art object, but there exists no direct tether between the thought of the author and the thought of the spectator. What holds the entire thing together, then, is the hope that one act of translation will roughly mirror the other. These translations happen most organically when they're allowed to occur without scrutiny, when we're largely oblivious to what's happening. Which, incidentally, is why digital theater (the atheocratic American theater inviting this elegiac act of writing) presents such a difficulty; in pursuing digital theater without time to earnestly process the transition from corporeal to computerized, we're adding an additional *two* intermediary acts of translation on top of the already extent two and we're stripping the entire thing of the common phenomenological vocabulary that makes it work in the first place.

Seeing in the theater, here defined as the product of these two distinct acts of translation (1. authorial thought into lines/images + 2. lines/images into spectatorial thought) is an inherent impediment of the form that consistently contends against the author's ability to communicate as desired. Inability to communicate then becomes an inability to build community which is, as we've defined, the ostensible goal of the American Theater™ contemporarily. The most powerful tools that the author has to try and direct or frame this communication are: style and structure. Via style and structure, the author can shape and design an art object with a reasonably predictable translatability. This is the part of artistry (what we commonly call "craft") that

requires rigor and repetition. An author that is sufficiently versed in style and structure is appropriately equipped to predict the secondary act of translation *while* performing the initial act of translation. Every audience is indeed unique, but the mechanical act of seeing is not. And so while an author can never account for a particular audience's reception, they can develop enough perspective to appreciate (albeit broadly and with room for error) how their work roughly translates—or, the spectator's internal mimesis of the author's constructed diegesis.

Style is color, style is composition, style is everything that could identify an author's work as their own; structure is the container we put it all inside of. And if everything is working the way that it's supposed to, structure is a composite part of an author's style. But this knowledge—both an abstract understanding of how seeing works from author to spectator *and* what parts of that “seeing” are within an author's control—is only as useful as it is actionable. Therefore, the defining arc of my study of playwriting has been discovering how to make the abstract (such thoughts as God, grandeur, or history) actionable.

4. On Style

In reflecting on the work of Milton in general, and *Paradise Lost* in particular, Gordon Teskey writes of a compositional style that is “gigantic and lofty” wherein “some connection exists between the hugeness of the scenes” and the “high moral seriousness with which [Milton] undertakes to disclose the origin of history and the cause of all evil.” Here, Teskey is working to concretely define the *sublime*—the adjectival agent responsible for what feels so singularly transcendent about Milton’s work. He identifies a difficulty in combatting the colloquialization of the word sublime, saying that “when we use the word *sublime* we tend to mean it more in the first sense than in the second, as an *aesthetic* term describing sensational hugeness, rather than as a *moral* term bearing on the consciousness of evil in history—or of good” (409-410). For the purpose of my present thesis, I believe that the two connotations of the sublime are indeed distinct, but interrelated. Correlation *and* causation. A play’s aesthetics almost always betray that play’s inwardly maintained morality and/or vice versa.

We’ve complicated our conception of ideas like good and evil in the time since *Paradise Lost*’s publication. So, too, have we complicated our moral affinities toward one or the other (i.e. the antihero remains a mass-cultural phenomenon). But the present trend, then, is to either adopt the *aesthetic* of the sublime or to adopt the *morality* of it. Which is to say, the default practice is to assume a sensational hugeness that’s not matched by the content of the piece in question or to assume a high moral seriousness for a play whose structure will inevitably fail to contain that seriousness—any kind of “moral seriousness” without the appropriate container just reads to a spectator as preachy and humorless while any kind of “sensational hugeness” without a justifiable content inside of it will read to a spectator as a hollow pretension.

Wary of these risks, but aspiring all the same, the ambition threaded throughout my work is an aspiration to the sublime and not just to aspire to it, but to wear that aspiration quite nakedly. It's a gesture toward scope and scale with guts behind the gesture; it's to reach toward a thing and structurally/compositionally announce one's reaching toward that thing at the risk of utter and abject public failure. And in so risking failure, the ambition beneath the ambition is that I am compromising or contending with the presumed sacrality of the author and the author's process. The American Theater™, by which I mean mainstream, narrative-based theater—the kind that is really conveniently modeled by New York nonprofits—is, in a manner of speaking, an engine that sustains itself. This is to say, that anyone working inside of the theater at any given moment is most likely making work for “The American Theater;” or: a collection of that artist's contemporaries—fellow writers, fellow directors, fellow actors, fellow designers, fellow crewfolk. And if not indeed “fellow,” then at the very least, aspiring. This means that one has to consider not only the spectator as spectator, but the writer as spectator as well.

If such a large percentage of the people encountering the thing are intimately aware of how the theater works, then the mechanical operation—the technical success or failure—of a play is as much a part of the spectacle as are the costumes or dialog. And technical success becomes all the more difficult to achieve the bigger the machine you build. This is because time and space are the raw materials for the theater, so the bigger the machine you build, the more you're tasking yourself with combatting the material limitations of the form and the people who are coming to experience the work. Spectacle or sensational hugeness is a high-wire act. Especially if the ultimate goal of the act is a sense of community among an audience and the makers of the art object they're encountering. To build a sense of community and to have that sense of community feel organic, you have to balance an appearance of effort with an appearance

of ease; the more explicitly a work reaches for a Miltonian sensational hugeness, the harder it is to maintain the requisite appearance of ease.

5. On PLANTATIONLAND

In my first year of graduate school, I felt acutely ignorant about theater and all of its composite mechanizations. But even in my inexperience, what most excited me about the form was its inherent liminality: not only that a play *could* exist as both text object and embodied phenomenon, but that it necessarily *had to* exist as both. I was interested in writing a play that maintained inside itself the kind of slow, discursive metabolism usually reserved for novels. I was searching after what it means to take up “space” on the page. Which prompts questions about the morality of taking up “space” in a form whose materiality is time and space itself (i.e. as is at present, *PLANTATIONLAND* is a 140-page intermission-less play – just on a base level, the questions arises: when are people going to use the bathroom? And if the play is chasing after the sensory experience of *the overwhelm* when is the spectator afforded time and space to process that experience?). *PLANTATIONLAND* is a play that is as much about the four slaves who run away from their Hell County plantation as it is about the playwright (Nick) who’s writing the play that they’re in.

After spending my originary period as author in intimate proximity to lit offices and readers, I was unsettled by the implicit limitation placed upon writers and the plays they wrote. Neo-naturalism seemed to have become the default mode not out of artistic curiosity but because it was economically the most feasible investment. It felt like I was witnessing, in real-time, a generation of theater-making whose tenants and ideals were written by the institutions after profit and self-mandated prestige rather than by the artists who were aspiring to foster or build community via story. So following a reactionary impulse, I decided to write something that broadly pastiched all of the mass culture that I felt had either deeply moved or deeply troubled me.

Some of those selected cultural referents include:

- *Payback* by James Brown
- *Footsteps in the Dark, Pts. 1 & 2* by The Isley Brothers
- *Let's Get It On* by Marvin Gaye
- *Get Low* by Lil' Jon
- William Faulkner
- Flannery O'Connor
- Tennessee Williams
- Zora Neale Hurston
- Kanye West (or, Kane Goin' West)
- *Sleepy Hollow*
- *Uncle Tom's Cabin*
- *The Klan*
- John Wilkes Booth
- Abraham Lincoln
- Quentin Tarantino
- Coney Island amusement park in Brooklyn
- *The Crows* (From 'Dumbo')
- "Jump, Jim Crow" by T.D. Rice
- *It Was a Good Day* by Ice Cube
- Richard Nixon
- Ronald Reagan
- *Jump* by Kris Kross
- Rick James (or Jhericurl-Drip Rick)

The hope of this style of citation was that if a spectator feels a sense of recognition at any point in the play, that recognition would be the basis of a kinship or oneness with the show. The kinship is prompted by a sense of identification with the play which is, in turn, prompted by the fact that the world of the play has identifiable cultural referents that resemble the ones from our lived world.

In so doing, hopefully, the play illustrates the constant simultaneity of history and the present. At the time of my writing PLANTATIONLAND there were three or four plays about slavery programmed that season in New York. None of which seemed to interrogate that the

writing of a play about any historical moment necessarily conjures that history such that the author needs to implicate him/her/themselves in that conjuring. Accordingly, PLANTATIONLAND features a Nick character who is quite literally put on trial. And while the particular construction of the moment might shift over time, the impulse behind it will not. If indeed I want to implicate an audience in their generic consumption of media about this historical atrocity—and historical atrocities more broadly—I need to implicate myself for the generic production of said media. Therein lies the broad community-making gesture of the play: a kind of universal, unexcepting inquiry about the “slavery as genre” trope. If anyone is ostensibly guilty, PLANTATIONLAND offers, then we all are.

In PLANTATIONLAND, the earliest of my MFA scripts, I found play in chasing Teskey’s sensational hugeness. In that playing, however, I lost the high moral seriousness or integrity of communicating authorial thought via line and image. The play I built maintained an unpredictable secondary act of translation—or stated otherwise, I as author had conjured such tools as style and structure without intentionality as to what those tools were meant to accomplish. I had built a Frankenstein of broad cultural citation and unfettered stylistic impulse and left it to its own devices. In the wake of that first draft of PLANTATIONLAND, I had discovered a sense of play that I wanted to carry through the rest of my work, but I knew enough to know that I needed to develop tools around building structure—the kinds of structure that could contain the scope of synthesis that was happening in the play.

6. On *Fall the House*

If PLANTATIONLAND can be read as an author considering the implications of working as inheritor to American history, the semester following it can be read as considering the implications of working as inheritor to theatrical history. This is conveniently represented by a pivot from a syllabus of Tennessee Williams to a syllabus of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. Euripides' oeuvre might most closely resemble the kind of psychological drama that feels second nature today, but when reading *The Oresteia*, I was most struck by Aeschylus's spectacle of language – that so much of the kinesis and dynamism of the play exists on a line level. I felt a kinship that I hadn't expected. Aeschylus's rhetorical rigor was palpable in the text and I wanted to appropriate that for the work that I wanted to do. *Fall the House*, then, is the first play that I had written that started by me building the language first.

Fall the House is a liberal but homagic adaptation of Aeschylus's *Oresteia* trilogy set in an urban housing project in the late aughties. I dress up Aeschylus's plot just a hair—mostly to build the world around Clytemnestra instead of Agamemnon and to refashion the play's implications about justice to more closely resemble contemporary ideas (or ideals, more cynically) of justice. PLANTATIONLAND reaches after the sublime by the sheer scope of its synthesis, *Fall the House*, though, is a technical departure—a move toward scope by virtue of world-building. The safety net of PLANTATIONLAND's magnitude is the play's persistent knowledge/awareness of itself as a play, while in *Fall the House*, I strip away that safety net. Most explicitly, if the rules of PLANTATIONLAND's world are nebulous, *Fall the House* demanded a diegesis of clear rules built in earnest and with integrity. And in building a world accordingly, I was leaning into the impulse to achieve scope and scale while cultivating the appropriate integrity of story.

The preeminent question, then, throughout my working on the play had to do with my enduring fascination with scale: how could I build a work that Teskey would call “sensationally huge” with a maintained “moral seriousness” while preserving legibility to an audience of people whose material, socioeconomic circumstance resembles that of the housing project depicted in the play? If the theater is a ritual in service of building community, I felt that PLANTATIONLAND was not sufficiently inviting to the kind of community that I wanted my plays to be in service to. This is to say, I wanted to build a play whose community building gestures were indeed legible to most everyone who would encounter it. This is when the ostensible contradictions of the conceit—Greek drama is usually read as high culture while stories set in or about housing projects are usually read as low culture—became the entire game of the play. Finding the right balance between rhetorically Aeschylean compositions and slang/urban colloquializations would ultimately determine whether the work was justifiably reaching for the sublime. In that balance, if I could orchestrate it, would be the requisite appearance of effort with the equal but opposite requisite appearance of ease. Stated reductively, when considering the play on a line level, the nature of questioning began to look like: how many references to hood culture (legible to the American Theater™ as low culture) would it take to justify a monologue, recited for pages on end, about living an entire life at the mercy of circumstance?

On a comparatively macro level, out of homage for the original, I wrestled with what a contemporary counterpart to the Festival of Dionysus would be. I wondered if there was a way that I could roughly approximate the experience of seeing a trilogy of plays in one evening as would have been the case millenia ago when Aeschylus first realized *The Oresteia* in production. If indeed there would be no Dionysian avatar in the audience that we could dedicate the play to,

how could the play exist in service of the theater's contemporary god of community and community building? Both the want to pay homage to Aeschylus's text and the want to incorporate some gesture toward community informed the ultimate structure of the play. The play exists, technically, in five acts. Three of those five acts (I, III, and V) are identifiable adaptations of each of Aeschylus's three plays: *Agamemnon*, *Libation Bearers*, and *The Eumenides* respectively. In these three acts is where most of the storytelling lives—it's where the plotting is at its most methodical. The character's entrances, exits, and the evolution of their respective arcs are all the most attentively orchestrated in these three acts. In these three acts, kind of like in *PLANTATIONLAND*, play exists on the basis on style. And that style can be playful *and still* be in service of effectively translating thought from author to spectator precisely because the structure is secure: there's a clear designation between the composite parts and each composite part has a refined purpose in the overall success or failure of the play.

The remaining two of *Fall the House*'s five acts (II and IV) are narrativized intermission sequences that contain inside of them information commenting upon the surrounding story. These two acts are where I invite play into the structure of the story. Leaning heavily into visual storytelling where the other three acts lean into varying rhetorical strategies of storytelling, Acts II and IV are where the play becomes a story unto itself rather than just a refashioning of the original trilogy. Acts II and IV, brief as they may be, contain the most departing commentary I offer as adapter on the source material I'm adapting (i.e. seeing the disparity between Ghost/Agamemnon's and Nessa/Clytemnestra's funerary sequences should visually represent the relative valuation of life and livelihoods both inside of Aeschylus's original trilogy and inside of the world rendered in *Fall the House*). By narrativizing those two intermitting acts, I try to create a sense of a world that lives, breathes and moves on whether or not a spectator is directly

engaging with it. The idea being that the performers will continue their performance whether everyone remains in their seat for the intermission sequences or whether the house has been left empty.

Written in five acts, however, *Fall the House* remains my most structurally identifiable reach for a Miltonian sublimity. Milton, however, is not bound by the material/economic ceilings of the American theater in the 21st century. So, after writing *Fall the House* and PLANTATIONLAND—two plays written in appeasement to my authorial id—and subsequently experiencing a production process wherein *Fall the House* had to be performed in one act rather than in all five because of economic, temporal, and burden-of-labor limitations, I found myself confronting the upper bounds of what a play could be if, in fact, that play wanted to assume a life in the American Theater™.

7. On Sycamore

After chasing the grandiose and the spectacular for much of my graduate career—the time of my writing *Sycamore* is one semester after trying to write a pseudo-apocalyptic Brechtian epic about America, American history, blackness, queerness, their intersections & American theopolitics *and* immediately after I wrote the previous play wherein I (or, at least an author character identified as “Nick”) experiences *Groundhog Day*-like time traps only to shoot for and try to kill the literal Abrahamic God at the end of the play—I was interested in what I could discover about myself, my voice, and the tools that I had developed in grad school if I reinvested in a kind of unspectacular—and only “unspectacular” relative to my other plays—social drama. If all I allowed myself was people, their words, and their setting, how could I build a play that compelled the most spectacularly-inclined parts of myself?

I had matured and grown as a writer in the time since *PLANTATIONLAND* and even in my time since *Fall the House*, so I already understood coming into the writing of *Sycamore* that inside of my authorial toolbox, spectacle could exist on the basis of high theatricality, on the basis of plotting, or on the basis of language/on a line level. Historically, when I had chased spectacle on a line level, I didn’t trust that it would be a rewarding or fulfilling theatrical experience. I would try to make an accompanying spectacle of high theatricality or of plotting that approximated the spectacle that was happening on a line level. In *Sycamore*, though, the spectacle was inwardly maintained. In writing a play that was about and/or inspired by my family, an unspoken spectacle was fidelity to the way that they talk and the ways that they relate to one another. It was an experiment of sorts: I was the control group whose investment was contingent on a simultaneity of spectacle while anyone else encountering the play had only the spectacle of language to invest in.

Sycamore is a play eponymously set in my family's multi-generational hometown in South Carolina. In it, a newly separated mother finds herself staying the night with her own mother and grandmother in the latter's trailer. The three of them await a homecoming of a recently-freed-from-jail nephew. All the while, they argue and reflect on their pasts, presents, and futures—each trying to live a life worth living and be a person worth being. In *Sycamore*, then, I bound myself to what felt like the most rudimentary tools at my disposal. I committed to the idea that I didn't need an Angel of History to crash through the ceiling in order to articulate some aspiration to "Great Work"—that authorial labor and an individuated sense of voice would be legible without massive set pieces to announce them. I was re-teaching myself how to trust both the work and the spectator encountering it. I was re-learning that I don't have to recite history (legibly civic as in the case of *PLANTATIONLAND* or legibly cultural as in the case of *Fall the House*) in order for a spectator to appreciate the presence of it. By positioning these three women of three different generations at odds with one another, we can identify the histories that are informing their presents. And in writing the play, I learned more about how these things function writ large: for instance, I learned firsthand that the magic of any social drama, really, (a la *Sycamore*) is being thrust into a world and engaging with that world on the basis of its histories, its presents, and its predictions (either optimistically or pessimistically) for the future. The play world in any social drama knows more about itself than it lets you in on and part of the game or invitation for a spectator is to gradually build out that world in their mind. Those places where the spectator doesn't fabricate truths, but rather appropriates them from lived world into the play's world, those places are where realizations about contemporary society and sociality often happen.

The great discovery of working on *Sycamore* was how much play you can find on a line level when you're not expending that energy facilitating a clever structural quirk or exhausting a theater's five-year's-budget-worth of materials. That labor on a line level doesn't necessarily have to become intricate composition, but that it can also become a legible playfulness; a playfulness inside of which the author and the spectator can meet. Moments of intense moral seriousness without play—reflecting further on Milton's successful invocation of the sublime—are crumpling for a spectator. They demand so much of their conscience and offer them little in return. A well-timed punchline can be transactional: I, as author, offer a brief respite from whatever social import I think my work is communicating to you and you, as spectator, offer me your attention and your consideration as long as I agree to maintain this or a similar kind of balance. Whereas in *Fall the House*, every line feels integral to the play's structural integrity—every line contains something of deep import without which the play is compromised—in *Sycamore*, almost every line is a quip or a joke or a slight. Neither play demanded more labor than the other on a line level, but in their differences, one can gauge a different approach in process.

Narratively, inside of the play, you can trace a winnowing of Christian religiosity down through the generations. More powerful than the biblical God, in *Sycamore*, is society and societal circumstance. The world outside of Evie-June's trailer exists in abstract only and yet it still feels like the antagonist that all of the characters are contending with. Here, I offer the question: what is that if not omnipresence? Where *Fall the House* has literal God-figures in its world, *Sycamore* does not. Where *PLANTATIONLAND* posits the author as God, *Sycamore* does not. *Sycamore* conjectures that God is something that is not quite as tangible as the other two plays would have us believe it to be. The community invoked in the play is complicated; the

community we witness on stage should exist in deep identification with one another and yet they don't. The invitation, then, (as is the invitation with most family dramas) is to find identification—to find a sense of community inside of the dysfunction. Maybe the most powerful commonality connecting us to one another is our deep desire to connect and the individual subjective impediments to that connection.

In *Sycamore*, strangely enough, I found identification where I didn't expect it. In building these characters as avatars for people in my very real life who I love, I discovered that I left the play loving them more deeply. I left the play with a more patient understanding than I had coming into it. *Sycamore*, then, becomes an example of community building not between author and spectator most spectacularly, but between author and subject. It's a merciful and invigorating play to have written at the tail end of my time in graduate school. It's the perfect example that my education here wasn't just about craft or process or the mechanics of writing, but that my education was an affective one as well. I am presently a version of myself that is that much closer to the version of myself that I aspire to. And I would not be this present version of myself if I hadn't discovered play and indulgence in *PLANTATIONLAND*, if I hadn't discovered the importance and manipulability of structure in *Fall the House*, and if I hadn't discovered the artistic/authorial merits of "restraint" in *Sycamore*.

8. On Perspective

As I graduate, theater buildings presently threaten to open as shells of their former selves, rather than as refashioned monuments to the capaciousness of theater as a form and the form's broad compulsion to progress—the theater will adapt over time even if the people inside of it refuse to. After a year-long suspension from productivity as we had known it, the theater is finally looking toward a horizon of allegedly new cultural production. The buffer against my excitement, however, is the knowledge that The American Theater™ will latch onto something comfortable before it allows itself experimentation. What's "comfortable" isn't community building. What's comfortable (and I'm speaking in a rough average) is complacent and isolating; it's identifiable for and by a community of people that we don't even know will return to the theater in the first place. What, then, is the job of me as writer under this both broad and individual circumstance?

I hope that I can continue to build the kind of work that I, as aided by my professors, have mined from myself in my time pursuing a Master of Fine Arts designation. The idea is, after all, that the degree here-earned is a pre-professional one and while this might be a crude reduction of linguistics, I have to imagine that post- pre- professional is, in fact, professional. That I am, upon completion of my program here, one of those constituent playwrights of The American Theater™. Suddenly and with little fanfare, I find myself armed with the knowledge alluded to herein and aware of the responsibility of my membership in such a small, rarefied group as "Playwright" by professional designation and "Master Playwright" by the University of Texas at Austin's designation.

In my time here I've built works that have been fastidiously constructed: the products of hours and hours of investment and labor. I've invested and labored thusly because I felt like it

was my responsibility; that my job as writer was indeed to make manifest “God” in the theater—via sensational hugeness, via explicit articulations about history and/or our respective place in it, via stylistically or structurally self-effacing authorial offerings. Without realizing it, though, in employing myself in that capacity, I excepted myself from the kind of humanity I wanted to represent in my work. There existed strict designations such as author and spectator. If one was an author, they could never truly be a spectator and if one was a spectator, they could never truly see as author. Things, broadly, are rarely so absolute. And these things, in particular, are only helpful insofar as they are true and they are only true insofar as they are helpful. I don’t want to except myself from earnest spectatorship, I want to ingratiate myself to it. I want to reconcile (both as author and as spectator) the two parts of myself—these two ways of being or these two ways of seeing.

I can now readily identify, then, that I belong to a broad community of humanity, a broad community of art-makers, and a broad community of American art-makers. But I also, concurrently, belong to significant sub-groups inside of those larger communities—existence in one doesn’t supersede or undermine existence in any other. And if I really refine the scope of my focus, eventually, I belong to a community of one. And via my practice, I’m gradually learning to find a feeling of community inside of that one. The ultimate endeavor is that I continue to make work that is as validating and as life-affirming for that community of one as it is for the broader community of humanity. Or maybe the latter half of that endeavor is far, far too ambitious for the life that I have chosen. Maybe I should define my goal going forward more simply. With great earnestness and affection I’ll meet myself, I’ll meet the people I love, and I’ll meet the words that I write. If ever I am indeed successful at building community larger than that, I will consider myself lucky and what’s more I will have contributed to the theater’s purest

version of itself—I will have added my own unique contribution to this ritual that we build in the service of getting to know one another as intimately as we are humanly able to.

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a thing tentatively called either:

a picaresque play, an exploration of American spectacle

PLANTATIONLAND

or

slaves/slavers/countrymen

by Nicholas Kaidoo

Inspired in part by:

Flight to Canada (1976) by Ishmael Reed
The Quadroons (1842) by Lydia Maria Child
The Quadroon; or Adventures in the Far West (1856) by Thomas Mayne Reid
An Octoroon (2014) by Branden Jacobs-Jenkins¹
The Boondocks ('96/'05) & *Black Jesus* (2014) by Aaron McGruder

¹ i.e. the whole “I don’t know what a real slave sounded like. And neither do you.” thing (Jacobs-Jenkins 17, Dramatists Play Service)

Cast:

(7 M, 5 F)

Play Synopsis:

Four slaves run away from their Hell County plantation. On the way to Freedomland, they discover Southern writers, Northern abolitionists, and John Wilkes Booth assassinates Lincoln twice. A pastiche exploration of American spectacle.

OUR CHARACTERS

THE FUGITIVES (a.k.a. The Stars)

QUATROON, house slave, dark-skinned

CUNTROON, field slave

TYROON, field slave

LADY BLACK-MOON, house slave

+ **FIA**, the lone wolf

THE LANDOWNERS (a.k.a. The “Supporting” Cast)

MASSA JOHN, the property and slaveowner of Plantationland

LUCY’N’LUDWIG, Southern store owners

THE ABOLITIONISTS [at least 3 total]:

(**SPEAKER**, **BOUNTY HUNTER**, **BAILIFF**, **JUDGE**, **LAWYER**)

ALONG THE WAY FOLK (a.k.a. The Doubling/Tripling/Quadrupling/Etc. is Crazy, Y’all)

IRISHMAN, an indentured servant

HORSEBACK, a horse

BLIND DRIVER, a blind driver

TOP 40 RADIO DJ (VOICE ONLY), a Top 40 Radio DJ

COLORED WAITER, a black waiter

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS, a Southern playwright

WILLIAM FAULKNER, a Southern modernist author

FLANNERY O’CONNOR, a Southern gothic short story writer and novelist

SLAVE CHASER #1 (VOICE ONLY), a man who chases runaways for the bounty on them

SLAVE CHASER #2 (VOICE ONLY), another man who chases runaways

ZORA, a cosmopolitan-seeming slave with a clever air about her

KANE GOIN’ WEST, a runaway slave fraught with grief and a God complex

JHERICURL-DRIP RICK (APPEARANCE ONLY), a super freak who doesn’t speak

OSTENSIBLY FREE BLACK WOMAN, wears matching wedding rings w/ **SPEAKER**

UNCLE SAM (APPEARANCE ONLY), American icon

RUNAWAY SLAVE COSPLAYER (APPEARANCE ONLY), someone dressed as a runaway slave, but not themselves a runaway slave

CIVIL WAR CONFEDERATE ARMY MEN (APPEARANCE ONLY)

CIVIL WAR UNION ARMY MEN (APPEARANCE ONLY)

ROBERT E. LEE (APPEARANCE ONLY), Southern general

JEFFERSON DAVIS (APPEARANCE ONLY), president of the Confederate States of America

ABRAHAM LINCOLN, President of the United States of America

MARY TODD LINCOLN (APPEARANCE ONLY), First Lady of the U.S.

JOHN WILKES BOOTH, the actor guy who killed Lincoln

A&R GUY, an asshole but astute music executive

KU KLUX KLANSMEN [at least 3 total], members of the newly-formed Ku Klux Klan

PARKER, a “good” white man

JIM, a New York City pigeon... kinda

CROW, also a New York City pigeon... kinda

NATIVE NYER, native NYer enjoying the city

CUNTRY, a runaway slave cum free person

TYRY, a runaway slave cum free person

LADY BLACK’RY, a runaway slave cum free person

JAMES BROWN (A RECORDING), from the song *Payback* (1973)

ICE CUBE (A RECORDING), from the song *It Was a Good Day* (1993)

MISCELLANEOUS

NICK, to be played by the playwright or someone who resembles QUATROON

JIM CROW

CUT FOR TIME

FREDERICK DOUGLASS / HARRIET TUBMAN / SOLOMON NORTHUP / NAT TURNER / SETHE / UNCLE TOM / NIGGER JIM / MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. / KUNTA KINTE / MALCOLM X / ANGELA DAVIS / JAMES BALDWIN / TA-NEHISI COATES / TYLER PERRY / ZORA NEALE HURSTON / MONTELL WILLIAMS / MORGAN FREEMAN AS SOME KINDA WISE OL’ WHITE-HAIRED HALF-BLIND SLAVE / OPRAH BECAUSE SHE PRODUCED THE MOVIE SO SHE HAS TO STAR IN IT TOO / JAMES A. BLAND / LAURYN HILL / SAM LUCAS / NENE LEAKES AS DEPICTED IN THE “KIM KARDASHIAN: HOLLYWOOD” MOBILE GAME / LANGSTON HUGHES / LEE DANIELS’ THE BUTLER / AUNT DINAH ROH / MICHAEL JACKSON / NEW DJANGO / MORRIS CHESTNUT / BILLY KERSANDS / WALLACE KING / TYLER PERRY AS “MADEA” / KENAN THOMPSON / SALT ‘N’ PEPA / MARTIN FRANCIS / CHRIS TUCKER IN THE “FRIDAY” MOVIES / W.E.B. Du BOIS / CHRIS TUCKER IN THE “RUSH HOUR” MOVIES / MICHAEL JORDAN / MICHAEL B. JORDAN / EDDIE MURPHY / WILLIAM HENRY LANE / RICK JAMES / MA RAINEY / THE GUY FROM THE ALLSTATE COMMERCIALS / MU-SHU FROM MULAN / THOMAS DILWARD / KAREEM ABDUL-JABBAR / FAMILY FEUD’S STEVE HARVEY / “BOO!” A MADEA HALLOWEEN / KANYE WEST IN A MAGA HAT / ALICIA GARZA, PATRISSE CULLORS, OPAL TOMETI / BELL HOOKS / AUDRE LORDE / ROSA PARKS / SOJOURNER TRUTH / ROBERT SMALLS / HARRIET JACOBS / SALLY HEMMINGS / WILLIAM AND ELLEN CRAFT / DENMARK VESEY / DRED SCOTT / WILLIAM HARVEY CARNEY / FIA / BOOKER T. WASHINGTON / HENRY “BOX” BROWN

SETTING(s)

Plantationland	(The South: GA, SC)
The Runaway Trail	(NC, VA, D.C., MD)
The North	(PA, NJ, NY)
The North-North	(Canada, or “Freedomland”)

TIME

1842 or thereabouts 1859 or thereabouts 1865 or thereabouts	} a <i>year</i> of profound unrest – of time smashed and folded in on itself.
---	---

“Fuck, man!”

“What?”

“They got me.”

“Shit!”

“What happened?”

“They got me too.”

-- a conversation between two slaves
c. 1619 to [present]

PRE-SCENE 1 – A WRITER’S ROOM
COLORED PEOPLE TIME

NICK runs in from off. He has red goop on his face. He’s not dressed.

Frantic, panting, frazzled. He faces vaguely away from the audience and he is dripping sweat.

He grabs a rag and wipes his face.

NICK

Fuck fuck fuck, I missed my cue. Fuck.
I’m late.

VOICE (OFF)

Wardrobe.

NICK

What?

VOICE (OFF)

Wardrobe.

NICK

Wardrobe?

(looks down and sees what he’s wearing)

Oh, shit. Just. Just toss it.

A blazer, shirt and tie are tossed unceremoniously onto the floor.

NICK

For Christ’s [sake]—

Matching trousers are hurled at his head.

He kisses his teeth and gets dressed, item by item—it’s a linen suit. Remarkably wrinkled.

NICK

Could nobody iron my fuckin’—? Ugh, Jesus. Nevermind.

Someone wheels on a small desk. On top of it there’s an Underwood Champion typewriter.

NICK sits alone, hacking away at the typewriter. He smokes while he speaks and he speaks while he types—the keys clicking kind of punctuate his reverie, smoke floats from his Camel cigarette or tiny tobacco pipe.

NICK

In my younger and more vulnerable years—

VOICE (OFF)

Nope. Try again.

NICK

(as he types, someone enters and keeps taking his pages and dropping them into a nearby wastebasket

//

As the voice interrupts him, both he and the voice work really hard to out-shout one another)

He was born with a gift of laughter / and a sense that the world was mad. Quite passive, recording, not thinking. The voice on the other end asking for someone he was not. “I am a sick man, I am a spiteful man.” I am an invisible man. Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show. It was a queer, sultry summer: the rain fell in torrents and it was a pleasure to burn. This all happened, more or less—they shoot the white girl first—and You better not never tell nobody but God: We were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way.

VOICE (OFF)

(at the same time as the above)

“And a sense that the world was mad,” don’t you dare. No. Stop it. No. You’re stealing. This is stealing. This is theft. These are other people’s bodies of work—intellectualproperty—oeuvres, if you will. Wow, you no-good motherfucker, you’re still going. They gon’ sue your ass all up and down the canon, phew, I wouldn’t wanna be yo’ sorry ass. How you gon’ pay a retainer off your off-off-Broadway money? Off your “I-work-part-time-at-a-nonprofit-theater” money? Who going the other way? You going the other way, nigga, fuck that.

NICK

The past? You can’t repeat the past. The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.

The INTERN snatches his page again.

NICK

Stop doing that!

INTERN

Sorry. It's my job.

NICK

Who are you?

INTERN

Intern. I work at the theater.

NICK

Of course you do.

NICK places a blank page. Starts anew.

NICK

In the beginning, there was man and there was hell.

(he lurches forward to protect his page from INTERN, waits on the voice; when neither interferes, he's found something original - he continues...)

Okay, okay. There was pen and there was hell. There was, uh...

(runs out of words; digs through his mental word bank for anything, anything at all)

slave?

(types it in tentatively)

... and there was hell. And we took this grand vision of what hell was: sirens screaming and the stench of flesh burning begrudged appetites and we folded it—careful to not crease or compromise it in the important places—into some forty odd acres that we affectionately nicknamed, “Hell County” square in the center of the American Georgian territory.

A century of coughin', coppin', and a cotton gin aside, the American South was God's backyard—where he relegated those things he felt not fit for the front but considered salvageable all the same. God, like his lower countrymen molded in his image, cared little for kindness or for people's livelihoods...

There's a knock on the door.

NICK

Fuck, they're after me!

NICK types on the typewriter.

NICK

Nick, writes a window...

A window wheels in from off.

He runs over to the window, opens it and looks out.

NICK

(it's a long way down)

Gahddamn! Hell no, hell fuckin' no...

NICK crosses back to the typewriter and keeps typing.

NICK

Nick writes a first-floor window...

He runs back over to the window. He looks down again. He hops through.

He door bursts open.

Lights down.

SCENE 1 – PLANTATIONLAND/THE HOUSE,
Q HANCOCK

A single person sneaks to the desk in the dark. He sits at the writing table.

House lights finally go down. Stage lights up.

This is QUATROON.

He pulls the quill from an inkwell and it fails to write, the inkwell is dry. He pricks himself and uses the inkwell to catch the blood. After enough has spilt, he sucks his wound until the bleeding stops, and then he starts writing in blood...

QUATROON continues writing, quiet all around him save for his own blood-tipped quill scrawling. Until someone breaks the quiet, that is...

TYROON (OFF)

Quatroon! Where you at, Q?

TYROON, a field slave in Timberland brand boots enters from behind him, trying to get a peek at what he's writing.

TYROON

Hey, Q, man, you ain't hear me callin' you? What'chu doin'?

QUATROON

I'm writin' me a romance story.

TYROON

A romance story?

QUATROON

Yeah, like a story about romance.

TYROON

Yeah, no, I know what a romance story is.

QUATROON

Oh, okay cool... It sounded like you didn't know what a romance story / was.

TYROON

Who all is it about?

QUATROON

Oh, you know, the main character, Quatroon—uh, Quantay—uh,—Quiet Kyle.

TYROON

The main character, Quiet Kyle?

QUATROON

(jotting this down as he says it)

Yeah, Quiet Kyle. Quiet Kyle meets a girl that goes by the name of America or, uh, Ah-meer-cek-uh OR Lucy / ... Yeah, Lucy.

TYROON

Lucy?

And what happen with Quiet Kyle and Lucy?

QUATROON

They fall in love.

TYROON

And do it work out for them?

QUATROON

I ain't get there yet.

TYROON

Hm. Ok. Well... You know, we was supposed to meet Cuntroon and Lady Black-Moon out there on the porch quarter past three. It's quarter past that now.

QUATROON

Yeah?

TYROON

Yeah.

QUATROON
(still writing)

Huh.

TYROON

Massa John 'n' dem done gone off to the market, so, we could just you know, finish planning our thing.

QUATROON

What thing?

TYROON

Fool, if you don't carry your ass outside! C'mon!

TYROON grabs QUATROON by the collar and drags him toward the wing.

QUATROON

Fine, okay, I'm coming. Wait!

QUATROON breaks from his grip and grabs his paper really quickly, spilling his blood across the table as he tips the inkwell.

TYROON runs after him and snatches his papers.

QUATROON

Tyroon!

TYROON

Quatroon, what kinda story is this? This ain't nothing but scribbles on the page

TYROON turns the pages out to QUATROON, revealing not letters but nonsignifying squiggles and random lines up and down the page.

QUATROON

I don't know how to write it in a way that makes sense to anybody else.

TYROON

But this makes sense to you?

QUATROON

Perfect sense.

TYROON

You might be twisted in the head there Quatroon. You know, Lady Black-Moon and Cuntroon both know how to read and write. Bet they be willing to teach you.

QUATROON

You think?

TYROON

Yeah, if you wanna write your story in a way that make sense, you know?

The two men exit off to the wing, TYROON's arm over QUATROON's shoulder.

Lights down.

SCENE 2 – PLANTATIONLAND, PORCH DREAMS

CUNTROON & LADY BLACK-MOON chill casually on an antebellum plantation porch. A pitcher of lemonade sweating, undrunk between them. Flies float dead at the top of it.

LADY BLACK-MOON

So, anyway, I drunk the rest of her wine and replaced it with water & grapes; then she drunk it and carried on like a whole damn fool. And then I'm like, "Well how?" 'Cause you know I knew she wasn't drunk 'cause she just drank some Welch's fruit water. I drank her wine.

CUNTROON

Them is the type you gotta be careful 'round. Liable to drunk one day, not the next. Liable to drunk one minute, not the next. Wary the white person with a fickle temperament.

LADY BLACK-MOON

After what I seen, you ain't got to tell me twice, girl. I mean, "ooh, Johanna baby come on now, no sense in dragging your knee-highs all across the dirt."

CUNTROON

Well, Massa John mussa enjoyed it. They to'e it up in that bedroom.

LADY BLACK-MOON

Oh-oh! How you know that?

CUNTROON

Who you think they had clean the sheets?

LADY BLACK-MOON

You? But you work in the fields.

CUNTROON

Guess they ain't want the gossip spreading all through the house. You know you and your housefolk could talk...

LADY BLACK-MOON

(faux-indignant)

Lil' ole me?! Why, I have no idea what you mean.

QUATROON and TYROON enter, not from the door on the porch, but from off the wings...
Hmm...

In any case, they join CUNTROON and LADY BLACK-MOON on the porch.

TYROON

Hey, y'all.

CUNTROON

There go Beavis and Butthead.

LADY BLACK-MOON

Or late and later.

TYROON

Ohmygod. Here they go...

CUNTROON

I work the fields too, but y'all the ones running on field slave time. I don't get it.

TYROON

We here now, ain't we? 'Sides it ain't even my fault. Q 'pparently figure hisself Rip Van Winkle or Nathaniel Hawthorne or sumn. / I seen him writing by candlelight dripping red on the page like literal blood.

QUATROON

/ Rip Van Winkle isn't actually a person.

LADY BLACK-MOON

How you mean?

TYROON

(snatching the papers from where QUATROON has them tucked away)

He was writin'. Pen and paper. Or at least tryin' to.

QUATROON

(snatching his pages back)

He say you know how to read and write. Could you teach me?

LADY BLACK-MOON

You sure you wanna know? You might not like what you find, you know how they say ignorance is bliss.

QUATROON

A lot of the times, ignorance is just ignorance.

LADY BLACK-MOON

So you wanna know to read?

QUATROON

Yeah, I wanna know. And to write.

LADY BLACK-MOON

Okay, yeah, sure, we could

(she looks at CUNTROON)

We could teach you to read and write.

QUATROON

Good. I figure that's where I'll get my power from.

LADY BLACK-MOON

What do you mean your power?

QUATROON

Tyroon got his Timbs. Cuntroon got her cunning. You got your house-kept hands. I'ma have my writing.

LADY BLACK-MOON

Sure, Quatroon.

CUNTROON

Fine, we done figured he need remedial reading on the road, now can we figure out how we gon' make it there in the first place?

LADY BLACK-MOON

I heard through the grapevine—

TYROON

Of course you did. Always listening to some twisted, tangled grapevine.

LADY BLACK-MOON

You got a problem? You need to take a comb to those tangled thangs you got growin' out your head, 'stead o' talking cross to me. Here, baby,

(she hands TYROON a spare rake)

here's a comb—learn what it is, learn what it do, learn how to work it, that oughta keep you busy while I finish my spiel—as I was saying, it's a party tonight.

CUNTROON

What we need with a party?

LADY BLACK-MOON

Okay, well, maybe it's less a party and more a ball. A Quadroon Ball.

CUNTROON

And...

LADY BLACK-MOON

Using *our* Quadroon, we could escape under cover of the festivities.

QUATROON

We have room enough for one more?

CUNTROON

The more people, the trickier the run.

TYROON

Who were you thinking?

QUATROON

I was just thinking about Fia. You know, she ain't never seen none but Plantatioland here.

They all look uncomfortable with this suggestion;
various “ew” noises.

QUATROON

What?

LADY BLACK-MOON

I don't know. Lately, she been tellin' this story and, you know, she seem... Mm... she seem like she might be up to something.

Shift focus to FIA, a work-worn woman, stands down left of the others and delivers an Oscar-worthy monologue under the harshest, most unflattering light we can find – she maintains a not-convincing amount of half-work while the other four stare at her.

FIA

I was bohwn heah, the son o' slaves. The son rise on the cotton fields and set on thuh sleeping quarters. My grand-mammy held my momma while she cut cane and my momma, me. / Mama-Say-Mama-Sah Ma-Ma-Coo-Sa; Mammy-Say-Mammy-Sah Ma-Ma-Coo-Sa; Mama Say One More Day and I Be Free. Mammy Say Fia They Fed Up Wit' Me. Mama Say I Ain'tcha Friend, but Massa'n'dem Dey Aint'cha friend times three carry the two. Mammy Say Follow My Lead if you wanna live till you gray. I was born picking boogers and reared picking bales. I don't believe in Heaven, with a capital 'H' or a lowercase one, what good is it believing in Heaven when you been born and raised in Hell County, Georgia. Satan County, Sycamore.

(she pulls out a tuft of cotton and plays with it)

White is a literal commodity to me. You know what they like: they like that cane turned to iodized shugger, they like that toe-back-oh turned to colorless smoke, they like my back beat 'till you see the bone. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, bohwn to bone, as it reads on my cross-generational tombstone.

She drops the cotton at the end of her speech.

TYROON

What is she goin' on about?

QUATROON

Is all that even true about her?

CUNTROON

Don't matter, I guess.

LADY BLACK-MOON

Like I'm sayin': Y'all sure she "all right"?

CUNTROON

Who ever said she was "all right"?

LADY BLACK-MOON

Guess you got a point there.

QUATROON

So, we running, then? Without her?

	CUNTROON
I guess so.	
	TYROON
You guess?	
	LADY BLACK-MOON
Yeah, way to half-step, Cuntroon.	
	CUNTROON
I just—y'all can't be pullin' no shenanigans when we get on the road now.	
	LADY BLACK-MOON
Why would we even want to?	
	QUATROON
Why y'all lookin' at me?	
	LADY BLACK-MOON
If anyone...	
	TYROON
It would be you.	
	CUNTROON
Thank you.	
	QUATROON
I'm not gon' pull no shenanigans.	
	An indentured IRISHMAN enters opposite FIA who, incidentally, has finished her origin story, but has begun again from the beginning—looping through it again and again as the scene plays on.
	He plays out to the crowd initially.
	LADY BLACK-MOON
Who da hell is this?	
	QUATROON
I thought all the white folks went to the market.	
	TYROON
That's what they told me.	
	CUNTROON

/ 'Cause they did.

IRISHMAN

Hello, top of the morning to ya.
 Hope I don't sound foreign to ya.
 Phew, I'd kiss that ass, miss that ass, though I hardly knew ya
(singing)

But who is youuuu?

(to LADY BLACK-MOON)

Is you damsel?

(to TYROON)

Is you distress?

(to QUATROON)

Is you Porgy?

(to CUNTROON)

Is you Bess?

But still twelve-fifths of a person, nothing more and nothing less.
 Is you Lady of the Night, and Night of Skin I Might Undress
(belting)

Whooooooo Isssssss—
 Yoooooooooooooooooooo—

IRISHMAN is left panting, basking in some silent
 applause that we can't hear.

CUNTROON crosses to him.

CUNTROON

Uhm... Who is you?

IRISHMAN

A friend. Plagued by similar circumstances as you.

TYROON

Similar?

IRISHMAN

Well, not dissimilar.

LADY BLACK-MOON

How 'not dissimilar'?

IRISHMAN

Ok. Dissimilar. But like, dissimilar and equal. / Indentured servitude is the 19th century's—

LADY BLACK-MOON

We really were having a private conversation, Mr... uh...

IRISHMAN

Funny you should ask, because—

CUNTROON

It won't matter, you won't be here much longer. Excuse us—

CUNTROON begins physically pushing
IRISHMAN from the stage space.

IRISHMAN

Oh, well, goodbye then; really I, uh, I would quite like to speak to the lady in the dress in the back

CUNTROON

You and every man this side of the triangle.

IRISHMAN

My dear in the dress, do reach out! As for the rest of you, I wish onto you the visitation of a half-man's ego and three grand visitations of violence.

TYROON

What are you?

CUNTROON

You know being a juju-man doesn't come with a trust, right? Buh-bye now.

And the IRISHMAN is gone.

IRISHMAN (OFF)

(hollow, as if from somewhere beyond)

Night of Skin I Might Undress

(belting)

Whoooooooo Isssssss—

Yoooooooooooooooooooo—

QUATROON

Really gets stuck in your head, huh?

LADY BLACK-MOON

I guess it does.

TYROON

So why won't you run with us?

CUNTROON

Fine, I'll go.

TYROON

Really?

CUNTROON

Yeah, what am I gonna stay here for? To listen to Fia?

They all look at FIA.

LADY BLACK-MOON

What really *is* wrong with her?

TYROON

Prolly tryin' to save herself in the story.

QUATROON

You think? / But it's so compulsive.

TYROON

Yeah, "I think," that's why I said it.

LADY BLACK-MOON

Hey, Fia!

She turns to them without stopping her story.

LADY BLACK-MOON

Fia, girl, you wanna run wit' us? Quatroon figure you might wanna come, so...

FIA stops telling her story, still looking at them.
Then, slowly, she turns out toward us and looks at
the crowd she sees before her.

She turns back to look at The Fugitives.

LADY BLACK-MOON

Fia, girl, you okay?

She turns back out toward us. She turns back to
The Fugitives.

CUNTROON

Hey, we go run to Freedomland, you could tell your story and a whole heap of people'll
listen and then they'll tell it too. You don't need here, Fia, you don't need this...

Come, girl, it's your birthday, right? It's always somebody birthday. Quatroon, go on and get the cake.

QUATROON

Which one?

CUNTROON

The one for us, asshole, the one without the shit in it.

QUATROON

Roger.

QUATROON exits.

CUNTROON

You ain't gotta hold your baby while you cut cane. This ain't even a cane plantation, this a cotton plantation. We go North-North, you ain't gotta cut nothing no more.

QUATROON re-enters with a sweet potato pie.

CUNTROON

Quatroon, I said a cake. That's a pie.

QUATROON

It's all I could find.

CUNTROON

That might be the one with the... *shit, in, it.*

QUATROON

Ohhhh... Oops?

CUNTROON

Whatever, just bring it here.

He does, and with her hand, CUNTROON grabs a piece and begins feeding it to FIA, who doesn't take.

CUNTROON

Fia, don't you. Fia, don't you want some cake?

CUNTROON tries to forcibly feed the cake to FIA, who spits it out.

CUNTROON

This might be the one with the shit in it.

CUNTROON tries a piece herself. Mulls it over.

CUNTROON

No, this a normal pie.

QUATROON

I figured I'da smelled the shit.

CUNTROON

Huh, I guess that's right.

And just like that, FIA shoves CUNTROON away, cake and all, and goes back to reciting her life story, more sincere and emphatic in her recitation now.

CUNTROON

Well, we lost her.

QUATROON

Damn.

LADY BLACK-MOON

Don't too much matter, right? We should start getting ready. We're gonna pretty you up, sneak you in. And then it's cross the property line and one foot in front the other till we get to Freedomland in the North-North.

QUATROON

Ooh, I bet the North-North is nice. Wait, I thought those balls were only for freewomen.

CUNTROON

Anybody get in long as you pretty enough.

LADY BLACK-MOON

C'mon now, let's get ready. Wait! Ay, y'all, get this: ...

(hammy)

"Let's pack our bags!"

On this line, they are all weak as hell. LMAO.

They exit. Leaving FIA to recite her life story to no one in particular.

Lights down.

SCENE 2 – PLANTATIONLAND,
DRESSING ROOM

QUATROON sits on a stool while LADY BLACK-MOON goes to work on his wardrobe and make-up. She's got a clothes rack and a multi-tiered make-up kit that she works out of.

QUATROON has an old beat-up book; he and LADY BLACK-MOON whisper reading notes throughout.

Nearby, TYROON and CUNTROON watch over them "supervising" but they're really just talking escape plans.

QUATROON

You could really make me look good, Lady Black-Moon?

LADY BLACK-MOON

Of course, Q, half the work they not paying me to do is to look pretty. Now do like this:

She does the lip blotting thing you do after you put on lip balm. QUATROON mirrors her.

CUNTROON

We might as well go on foot.

TYROON

On foot? Girl, I'm supposed to walk my way to freedom in Timbs? / You know these hurt my feet, right?

CUNTROON

Tyroon, really, you been wearin' the same Timbs since forever and a day.

LADY BLACK-MOON

You're gonna get so much attention, Q, these women are gonna be all over you.

QUATROON

I hope so. It'd be nice to be with a woman.

LADY BLACK-MOON

You've never been with a woman, Quatroon?

QUATROON

Never.

LADY BLACK-MOON

Huh. That'll change. Then you might wish it hadn't.

QUATROON
(pointing to something in the book)

What's this?

LADY BLACK-MOON

Begotten.

QUATROON

"Begotten."

TYROON

Hey, are y'all done yet over there?

LADY BLACK-MOON

Yup. But is y'all ready?

CUNTROON

/ I guess.

TYROON

I literally could not care less.

LADY BLACK-MOON

Presenting: the new and improved Quatroon!

Between LADY BLACK-MOON and
 QUATROON, they pull of some swooping big
 reveal gesture. QUATROON grandstands at the
 end of it.

LADY BLACK-MOON

Voila!

TYROON

Voila-what?, He look exactly the same.

LADY BLACK-MOON

Well, he ain't got the suit on yet. The suit is really what complete the effect.

TYROON

If you say so. You really think this gonna work?

CUNTROON

You think your plan gon' work better?

TYROON

My plan? What plan?

Oh, I see what you did there. No, you right, I'm in.

CUNTROON

Good. So let's get Quatroon into his suit and let's get ourselves ready. If it's a party 'fore we run, we might as well celebrate like it right? Quatroon not the only one getting lucky with love tonight.

TYROON

Yeah, man, I hope you know what to do with all that lovin' they gon' be throwing to you tonight.

CUNTROON and TYROON exit.

LADY BLACK-MOON

You look real nice, Q. It's gon' be your night. I hope it's special.

QUATROON

Thank you, Lady B-M.

LADY BLACK-MOON

Don't – No, No – don't call me / that.

QUATROON

Yeah, no, I heard it.

They exit together. Lights down.

SCENE 3 – PLANTATIONLAND, A "QUATROON" BALL

What follows is a teen-movie-inspired dramatic montage, wherein we see the gang in different moments throughout the night of a dance. Song cues are subtle scene shifts.

Note: if we can't afford licensing, maybe even still in a lip-sync scenario, FIA sings the songs nearby.

As the songs cycle through, the couples (CUNTROON+TYROON, LBM/IRISHMAN) get closer to one another and QUATROON remains painfully, painfully alone.

The Beginning of the Night – “The Glenmary Waltzes” by Richard S. Willis

Everybody’s shy.

Next:

Warming Up – “My Sweet and Tender Beast” by Eugen Doga

TYROON and CUNTROON tease each other, IRISHMAN keeps sneaking peeks.

Next:

We Gettin’ There – “Let’s Get It On” by Marvin Gaye

The guys is trying to run game: TYROON is okay, the IRISHMAN is terrible.

Next:

The Slow Dance – “Your Body is a Wonderland” by John Mayer

A vaguely sensual slow dance.

Next:

From Slow to Low: Let’s Get Crunk! – “Get Low” by Lil’ Jon & The East Side Boyz

They basically humping with they clothes on. IRISHMAN is not good at this.

Next:

The Beginning of the End of the Night – “I Wanna Dance with Somebody” by Whitney Houston

QUATROON is alone at the table with a dead flower. His friends are doing a fun “cooldown” dance.

Next:

The ACTUAL End of the Night a.k.a. The Song They Play to Get You Desperate, Nut-Hugging Motherfuckers Out the Club – “One is the Loneliest Number” by Three Dog Night

CUNTROON and TYROON walk off together. LADY BLACK-MOON and the IRISHMAN walk off together. QUATROON is still alone. He may or may not be crying.

FIA enters.

FIA

What all happened here?

QUATROON

Nothing.

FIA

What’s up with you? You seem down.

QUATROON

No, I’m good. Thanks for asking, though.

FIA

Okay. You know I’m here if you need to talk. I ain’t never not here.

She starts to go about her way.

QUATROON

Hey, Fia?

She turns back.

QUATROON

You sure you don’t wanna run with us?

FIA

That’s sweet, Quatroon, really, but I can’t make up my mind to go just yet. I mean, this the place I was bohwn, you know? My grandmamma and my mama, too.

QUATROON

Well, I gotta get goin’, but if you change your mind...

He pulls a rolled up piece of paper from his breast pocket and hands it to FIA. He exits.

FIA opens the paper and her jaw drops.

Lights down.

SCENE 4 – PLANTATIONLAND,
ON THE LAM

A clearing near the woods.

There's a bright painted line center right of them.
All four Fugitives have dummy versions of
themselves.

QUATROON

What happened to all the attention you all said I would get?

QUATROON starts setting up his dummy. As
does CUNTROON.

TYROON

Maybe Lady Black-Moon should've did a better job with your makeup.

LADY BLACK-MOON

Oh? We gon' come for Lady Black-Moon then? That's what we doin'?

TYROON

How it was a Quadroon Ball and the only Quadroon here ain't get no love? You were
responsible for grooming him, right? / So... So... So...

LADY BLACK-MOON

I got myself taken care of. Is it my business if he can't take of himself?

QUATROON

/ Wait a minute...

CUNTROON

That was good for you? With the Irishman?

LADY BLACK-MOON

Yes!

... Well, No.

(indiscreetly, she checks her sides)

Wait, okay: No, dramaturgically, we had a night of lovely, mutually enjoyable sex as was
inevitable when the DJ played, "Till the sweat drip down my balls," because I am a sexually

liberated woman in the twenty-first century, however, the historical analogue is that he raped me and no one will talk about it tomorrow, let alone centuries from now.

Anyway. Did you two...?

CUNTROON

/ Girl, of course not, I would never! Tyroon? Lady Black-Moon, please! I'd sooner drown than lay up wit' him.

TYROON

What? No! That would be crazy, do I look crazy to you? Girl, you must got me pegged wrong or sumn.

LADY BLACK-MOON

("It ain't that deep...")

Okay den, damn...

QUATROON

So are we crossing this line or what?

TYROON

Hell yeah, I'll do it right now.

TYROON sets up his dummy and then steps over the line.

TYROON

Ooo, I stepped over the property line, I'm *so* scared. Hahaha!

They all laugh with him.

MASSA JOHN (OFF)

Cuntroon! Tyroon! Anyone seen them and they crew?

A whip cracks.

TYROON

Oh, shit! Shutup, y'all, come on!

CUNTROON, LADY BLACK-MOON, and QUATROON run over the line and all four run off in a panic.

MASSA JOHN enters. He doesn't have a whip.

MASSA JOHN

(to the dummies)

Oh, there you all are. I heard rumors you all had been down to the ball. Happy to see that ain't true. That I got good, well behaved slaves in my possession. The Lord says...

FIA enters.

FIA

Uh, suh?

MASSA JOHN

Yes, Fia? What is it? I was really in the middle of—

FIA

Dey gone.

MASSA JOHN

Dey what?

FIA

Yeah, dey not here.

MASSA JOHN

What do you mean? They right here.

FIA crosses to the Quatroon Dummy and tips its head. It falls off.

MASSA JOHN

Goddammit!

FIA

I could help you find them, though.

MASSA JOHN

Could you?

FIA

I could. For a price.

MASSA JOHN

Why would you do that?

FIA

Because, suh, I was bohwn heah, you know?. Always been the son 'o slaves...

FIA and MASSA JOHN walk off together.

Lights down.

SCENE 5 – PLANTATIONLAND,
HITCHIKER'S GUIDE

The Fugitives wander down a dark night
abandoned road.

LADY BLACK-MOON

Okay, so we made it outta Hell County.

TYROON

But. I hear a “but” coming.

LADY BLACK-MOON

But, we need to figure how best to put distance between us and it as fast as possible.

QUATROON

We could run.

TYROON

/ I ain't running no two thousand miles. I ain't no Jesse Owens.

CUNTROON

I ain't running no two thousand miles. Shit. I look like Harriet Tubman to you?

QUATROON

Okay, well that's out.

CUNTROON

Just give me the plans, Quatroon.

QUATROON

Uhh...

CUNTROON

What, “uhh...”? Negro, don't “uhh...” me.

QUATROON

I may have accidentally given the plans to Fia...

CUNTROON

/ Ugh! Goddamn shenanigans.

TYROON

/ You deadass, Q?

LADY BLACK-MOON
 Fuck, Quatroon, come on!

CUNTROON
 Well, what now?

LADY BLACK-MOON
 We could hitchhike.

TYROON
 That wasn't a part of the plans.

LADY BLACK-MOON
 Well, we don't have the plans no more, do we?

CUNTROON
 Who's gonna pick up a group of runaway slaves anyway?

LADY BLACK-MOON
 Watch this.

LADY BLACK-MOON sticks her thumb out.

A white man with makeshift hooves—this man is called HORSEBACK—drags on a wagon with two rows of seats.

Up in the front seat is BLIND DRIVER, a white man with thick, dark sunglasses on.

LADY BLACK-MOON
(using a mock-white affectation)
 Excuse us, sir, it look to me like you setting out North and me and my family, we could sure use a ride up toward North. Seems I lost my travel fare. You don't mind if we ride with you, do you?

BLIND DRIVER
 No, not at all... Wait a second...

BLIND DRIVER tries to scrutinize them behind his sunglasses.

BLIND DRIVER
 You're not runaway slaves, are you?

Beat. The Fugitives all look at one another. They copy LADY BLACK-MOON's affectation...

THE FUGITIVES

(variations on a single theme)

What? No! What ever would give you that idea? Pssh, please. We hate runaways.

BLIND DRIVER

Oh, alright then. Y'all hop on in. Happy to help. I'm only going so far as North Carolina, though.

LADY BLACK-MOON

That's plenty far. Thank you, sir. I've always depended on the kindness of strangers.

BLIND DRIVER

With all due respect, Miss, that's a stupid thing to do. And a even stupider thing to say. You can't trust another person with that kinda information.

They ride off, pulled by HORSEBACK.

Lights down.

SCENE 6 – PLANTATIONLAND,
THE PURSUERS

FIA and MASSA JOHN stand face to face. Mano e mano. Very action movie.

MASSA JOHN

Alright, Fia, lead the way. Go on and sniff out them runaway kin o' yours.

FIA

What?

MASSA JOHN

I said, "Go on and"—

FIA

Them fools ain't kin o' me. 'Cause I figure a better, more foolproof way to steal my freedom. I'm smarter'n dem. Now, bring yo' sorry ass on. They went this way. And I ain't got to smell nothing, I know 'cause I could read they plans.

MASSA JOHN

You could read?

FIA

Yeah and you can't. What of it? It's a shame too, you be sittin' there sermonin' and don't even know to read the fuckin' Bible. It's a special corner of hell for you. I don't even know how you gon' sign my freedom papers when you can't e'en read and write.

MASSA JOHN

I like you, Fia.

She looks over The Fugitives' plans.

FIA

Mhmm.

MASSA JOHN

No, for real. You know why I like you?

FIA

Mm, why's that?

MASSA JOHN

You not like the other ones, Fia. The way you speak. The way you carry yourself. If I ain't seen your complexion myself, I mighta mistook you for white.

FIA

(unmoved)

Is that so?

MASSA JOHN

It is.

FIA

Well. Hmph.

Wanna hear a story?

MASSA JOHN

Sure. We proolly got a ways o' travelin'.

MASSA JOHN whistles for his horse.

HORSEBACK gallops in MASSA JOHN hops on, piggyback style.

MASSA JOHN

How's it go?

FIA

I was bowhn heah, the son o' slaves, the son rise on the cotton fields and set on the sleeping quarters...

They exit and lights go down gradually to suggest a sun setting as they walk off.

SCENE 7 – THE RUNAWAY TRAIL,
THE DELI ON THE CORNER

HORSEBACK pulls the wagon to the center of the space. There's a deli door off-center.

BLIND DRIVER

I'm 'fraid this far as I can take yuh. Couldn't dare bring another woman and her family home to my wife. Made that mistake more than once.

LADY BLACK-MOON

(her white affectation)

S'that so?

BLIND DRIVER

Yeah, let's just say I wasn't always blind. Heh, heh. No, I'm kidding.

LADY BLACK-MOON

Well, thank you for your kindness. My husband'll post you travel fare. Consider yourself no longer a stranger.

BLIND DRIVER

Y'all have a good evenin', now.

HORSEBACK pulls the wagon and the BLIND DRIVER off.

They look at each other and start laughing.

TYROON

"Consider yourself no longer a stranger."

CUNTROON

Ha! "My husband'll post you travel fare." Girl, my stomach hurt from tryna not laugh in that man face.

Phew.

They compose themselves.

CUNTROON

Alright y'all, let's figure where we are and where we goin'.

LADY BLACK-MOON

We gotta be somewhere in North Carolina according to the driver man.

CUNTROON

Right.

QUATROON

Is that a shop?

TYROON

C'mon man, we don't have time for—

QUATROON

No, I know. I'm just gonna get a cola real quick.

TYROON

I really don't think that's a good idea.

QUATROON

Nah, it'll be real quick, man. 'Sides I need to spend the change I found in the driver's backseat.

TYROON

No, Q, man, come on back. Cuntroon is...

And QUATROON's off.

CUNTROON

Where Quatroon goin'?

TYROON

He said he wanted to buy a cola real quick.

CUNTROON

And you let him?

TYROON

I tried, okay? He's a grown man, I can't hold his hand to keep him from doin' stuff.

CUNTROON kisses her teeth.

SCENE 7A – THE RUNAWAY TRAIL,
THE DELI ON THE CORNER (cont'd)

QUATROON walks into the bodega-like corner shop. LUCY'N'LUDWIG snap their necks to

look at him. All three sets of eyes meet someway
somehow what in sam-hell, there's something
there?

LUCY'N'LUDWIG, for their part, seem
somehow attached at all, all, ALL times.

LUCY('N'LUDWIG)

Hi.

QUATROON

Hi.

(LUCY'N')LUDWIG

Hey there.

QUATROON

Hey.

LUCY'N'LUDWIG

You let us know how we could help you.

If you need help finding something.

QUATROON

Just a cola, thanks.

QUATROON coyly peruses the aisles.

LUCY'N'LUDWIG coyly watch him as he does.

TYROON slips in, tiptoeing.

LUCY('N'LUDWIG)

So... where you from?

QUATROON

Free. From the North.

LUCY'N'LUDWIG

Huh. Well, what's your name? I'm Lucy.

And I'm Ludwig.

Their names—the former one in particular—
weigh heavily on QUATROON.

QUATROON

Quatroon.

(LUCY'N')LUDWIG

I always wondered, Quatroon, what a free slave do wit' all that free time anyway?

QUATROON

Huh?

(he finds a cola)

Oh, here it is.

TYROON grabs a roll of crackers. He sneaks
back out.

LUCY'N'LUDWIG

I say, I wonder what a free colored man do wit' all that free time anyway.

QUATROON

Oh, you know, not much.

(places some change on the counter)

Like any other man, try to keep busy, Support himself.

*(to LUCY['N'LUDWIG] who's manning the register; they
lock eyes intensely)*

Keep the change.

LUCY('N'LUDWIG)

Thank you. S' mighty generous of you.

QUATROON

I'm a mighty generous kinda guy.

(LUCY'N')LUDWIG

That include with your time?

QUATROON

I'm sorry.

LUCY'N'LUDWIG

I ask if that generosity include your time

Since you free, I'm sure you got plenty time to spare.

QUATROON looks toward the front door.

QUATROON

Oh, uh. Something like that, I guess. What were you thinking?

LUCY'N'LUDWIG

Since you from the North.

Maybe we could take you out.

If you'd like.

To a Southern place.

We know we would.

QUATROON

Like a?

LUCY'N'LUDWIG

Sure, like a date. If you fancy to call it that.

What do you say?

We good people, we promise. Not like them other Southern whitefolk.

We'll take good care of you.

They're gently affectionate physically; they
squeeze his shoulders, rub his back.

QUATROON

You will?

LUCY('N'LUDWIG)

Course we will.

QUATROON

Just give me one minute.

LUCY'N'LUDWIG

Take your time. We'll start locking up. We can head to the place soon as you ready.

QUATROON rushes out the shop.

Lights down.

SCENE 8 – THE RUNAWAY TRAIL, STRANGE ENCOUNTERS OF THE INFATUATORY KIND

CUNTROON, TYROON, and LADY BLACK-
MOON wait outside. They're listening to a
boombox radio.

TOP 40 RADIO DJ

This is HOT 97 where we play all the dopest runaway slave hymns

*(Radio SFX echo: "all the dopest runaway slave hymns! all
the dopest runaway slave hymns!")*

, right now we got for you: Steal Away (to Jesus):

Steal Away (to Jesus) plays from the radio.

QUATROON runs into them.

QUATROON

Hey...

CUNTROON

Okay, Quatroon, you got your cola?

He shows his cola.

CUNTROON

Good, now c'mon. Let's go.

CUNTROON, LADY BLACK-MOON, and
TYROON begin walking. QUATROON
doesn't.

CUNTROON

Quatroon, what is it? We ain't got time. Come on, now.

QUATROON

I might need to pull *o n e* shenanigan.

Beat.

All at once, CUNTROON lunges for
QUATROON. LADY BLACK-MOON and
TYROON hold her back.

LADY BLACK-MOON

Wait, Cuntroon, let's hear him out. We don't even know what it's gonna be yet.

CUNTROON exhales, belabored.

CUNTROON

And what might this one shenanigan be, Quatroon?

QUATROON

I wanna go on a date.

CUNTROON

A date? With who? Lady Black-Moon? She'll take you on a date when we get up to the
North-North.

LADY BLACK-MOON

Ooo-ooo, let's not say all that now.

They both look at her.

LADY BLACK-MOON

Sorry, y'all, y'all was talkin'.

She retreats from the conversation.

CUNTROON

Okay? Now, let's—

QUATROON

I don't wanna go on a date with Lady Black-Moon.

LADY BLACK-MOON

Haha, hate to interrupt, but I wanna just, you know, reiterate that that was never actually on the table.

TYROON comes and ushers her away from the confrontation.

LADY BLACK-MOON

Okay, yeah, cool. I made my point. I'm backing up now. I'm... not-for-sale.

CUNTROON

Then who? And you better talk fast because this sun is movin' and we losin' time.

QUATROON

Lucy'n'Ludwig.

CUNTROON

And who in the sam-hell is Lucy'n'Ludwig?

QUATROON

The store owners.

CUNTROON

(trying to sneak a peek)

It's freed people running that store? If I knew...

QUATROON

They not freed people.

CUNTROON

Slaves?

QUATROON

They white.

LADY BLACK-MOON and TYROON gasp sharply. LADY BLACK-MOON begins choking on the crackers they been eating. TYROON pats her on the back.

TYROON

Alright, breathe girl, breathe. / We not done gettin' the tea.

LADY BLACK-MOON

I'm trying, I'm trying. Phew. Okay. I'm okay. Thank you.

TYROON

Good, gimme some more crackers.

She does. They keep eating crackers and watching.

CUNTROON

They white?

QUATROON

Yes.

CUNTROON

And you wanna go on a date with these white people?

QUATROON

Yes.

CUNTROON

And in your mind, you 'on't see none wrong with that?

QUATROON

No.

CUNTROON

And these white people wanna go on a date with you?

QUATROON

Yes.

CUNTROON

And you don't find that suspicious?

QUATROON

No.

CUNTROON

Alright, hell, I ain't your mama. Go on ahead.

QUATROON

Thank you.

TYROON

This is stupid.

LADY BLACK-MOON

Well, I think it's sweet. I should hope everyone can find love in such surprising places.

TYROON

Bullshit.

LADY BLACK-MOON

Easy for you to say, you got Cuntroon right running alongside you.

TYROON starts choking on crackers.

TYROON

(between coughs)

What, I. Don't. Love Cuntroon.

LADY BLACK-MOON

If you say so...

CUNTROON

And you understand that we have to leave now to keep proper pace?

QUATROON

I understand.

CUNTROON

With or without you. And if we don't go now, we could very well die. Or be taken back to Hell County marked as runaways.

QUATROON

I understand.

CUNTROON

And you'd rather / stay?

QUATROON

And I'd rather stay, yes.

TYROON

So is this, um, is this... goodbye?

For a moment, no one says anything.

TYROON crosses to QUATROON and gives him a real tight hug.

TYROON

I love you, buddy. I'll miss you. Now, I'll just be stuck with these two.

QUATROON

Yeah, but you'll get more alone time with Cuntroon.

TYROON

What? Why does everyone? Why do y'all think that? I don't love her.

TYROON walks off. CUNTROON hugs him next.

CUNTROON

You know this is exactly the kinda shenanigans I was afraid you'd pull.

QUATROON

I know.

CUNTROON

Take care of yourself, Q. You can love 'em, sure, maybe you can't help that part. But don't trust 'em, you hear me?

QUATROON nods. CUNTROON walks off.
LADY BLACK-MOON hugs him next.

LADY BLACK-MOON

I'm sorry we couldn't finish your reading lessons.

QUATROON

I could kinda read, though.

LADY BLACK-MOON

Yeah? Well keep practicing. You'll get better at it.

LADY BLACK-MOON kisses him on the cheek.

LADY BLACK-MOON

Stay kind, okay?

CUNTROON

Okay, y'all, let's go on now before we lose sunlight. Or before John 'n' dem start out looking for us. / Take care, Quatroon.

TYROON

/ Later, buddy.

LADY BLACK-MOON

/ See ya, Q.

And The Fugitives sans QUATROON take off waving, and QUATROON waves back as they walk into the distance.

Lights down.

SCENE 9A/9B – THE RUNAWAY TRAIL,
BBQ DINNER DATE: PROSE & PULLED PORK PANTYHOSE

QUATROON sits at a table-clothed dinner across from LUCY'N'LUDWIG.

Early on, QUATROON struggles to read the menu. As they speak, LUCY'N'LUDWIG tease the menu away from him.

LUCY'N'LUDWIG

So, tell us about yourself, Q.

Where do you work for instance?

QUATROON

I'm actually between positions right now.

LUCY('N'LUDWIG)

Yes, it's nice to have choice, isn't it?

QUATROON

I like to believe that.

(LUCY'N')LUDWIG

Too much choice might well make a man lazy. Indecisive.

QUATROON

Sometimes the choice come easy.

LUCY('N'LUDWIG)

Sometimes you ain't gotta make a choice at all.

Suddenly they're all holding hands, instigated by
LUCY['N'LUDWIG].

Shift focus; i.e. lights dim on them and heighten
elsewhere, on another table...

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS and WILLIAM
FAULKNER walk toward the table from opposite
sides of the restaurant.

WILLIAM FAULKNER

Thom Tennessee Williams.

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

Mr. William Faulkner.

The men hug above the table and assume their
seats. They each sip silently at their waters.

WILLIAM FAULKNER

From the looks, we'll be dinin' alone then?

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

Uh, I invited Flannery, actually.

WILLIAM FAULKNER

Flannery?

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

Flannery O'Connor? / Surely, you've read her work?

WILLIAM FAULKNER

Ah, Flannery, yes. How's she?

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

You can ask'a fuh yuhself when she gets here.

A COLORED WAITER comes over to the table
and waits expectantly with a notepad.

COLORED WAITER

Ready?

WILLIAM FAULKNER

Oh, why'm 'fraid I haven't had time to look well over the menu.

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

Why 'on't I order for yuh, Will? I feel we have similar appetites.

WILLIAM FAULKNER gestures his approval.
TENNESSEE WILLIAMS pulls the boy down
and whispers something in his ear. The
COLORED WAITER scribbles in his pad and
makes his way to an exit.

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

Hey, waituh!

The COLORED WAITER stops and turns.

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

Thah's 'dawwk,' right?

COLORED WAITER

Yes... Sir.

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

My many thanks.

The COLORED WAITER nods and exits.

The sound of sicked dogs tearing teeth through
flesh and barking between bites, of presumable
runaway slaves screaming, and of whips cracking
punctuating the whole thing—it begins softly.

LUCY('N'LUDWIG)

So you said you're between jobs? What was your most recent position?

QUATROON

Oh, you know, I worked in domestics.

It gets louder. As the sounds get louder and
louder, QUATROON & LUCY'N'LUDWIG
have to speak louder and louder, struggling to be
heard above the shouting and other violence.

(LUCY'N')LUDWIG

What all does "domestic" consist of?

QUATROON

You know, my employer give me directions and I just try to do all what he say for me to do.

LUCY('N'LUDWIG)

I bet you work hard, huh?

QUATROON

Yeah, I do. Figure a man should work like his life depend on it.

Louder still.

(LUCY'N')LUDWIG

What do you like to do for fun?

QUATROON

I like to go to church, you know. And I like to listen to records and stuff.

LUCY('N'LUDWIG)

Records? What kind of records?

QUATROON

You know, uh, they got some of those Sunday hymns in there, I like those I guess.

(LUCY'N')LUDWIG

How you collect your records?

QUATROON

Sometimes if I stand outside by a store that play 'em, you know? If I offer to work for 'em for free, they'll let me hold a record or two.

Louder still.

LUCY('N'LUDWIG)

Yeah?

QUATROON

Yeah.

(LUCY'N')LUDWIG

We prolly got a couple records on down at the store that you could probably have.

Louder.

QUATROON

That's kind of you.

LUCY('N'LUDWIG)

WHAT?

QUATROON

I SAID, "THAT'S KIND OF YOU."

LUCY'N'LUDWIG

WELL, THAT'S KIND OF YOU TO SAY.

OF COURSE, WE'LL NEED YOU TO DO SOMETHING FOR US FIRST.
NOTHING WE THINK YOU'D BE AVERSE TO ANYWAY.

QUATROON

WHAT?

LUCY('N'LUDWIG)

I SAID, "NOTHING WE THINK YOU'D BE AVERSE TO ANYWAY."

QUATROON

OH. OKAY.

LUCY'N'LUDWIG

THIS MUSIC IS TOO LOUD, DON'T YOU THINK?

I'M SORRY?

I SAID, "THIS MUSIC IS TOO LOUD." I'M GONNA HAVE THEM LOWER IT.

[LUCY'N']LUDWIG signals the waiter over. The
COLORED WAITER enters and crouches to
hear him better.

(LUCY'N')LUDWIG

(into the COLORED WAITER's ear)

UH, GARÇON, COULD YOU LOWER THE AMBIENT MUSIC PLEASE?

COLORED WAITER

OH, YES, OF COURSE, RIGHT AWAY.

The COLORED WAITER exits. The sound of a
metal door opening.

COLORED WAITER (OFF)

Hey, I need y'all to lower all that before I have to do it myself.

SLAVE CHASER #1 (OFF)

I'm afraid we can't do that. These here is runaways.

SLAVE CHASER #2 (OFF)

Well, what if we gag 'em? You gotcha gag, Bob?

SLAVE CHASER #1 (OFF)

I do not.

SLAVE CHASER #2 (OFF)

You don't? Why not?

SLAVE CHASER #1 (OFF)

Leslie and I, uh, we used the gag. For ourselves. In the bedroom. Last night. I could remember where I left it on the nightstand.

SLAVE CHASER #2 (OFF)

Well, damn, hoorah for you.

COLORED WAITER (OFF)

For fuck's sake...

The COLORED WAITER shoots: one, two. The men stop screaming.

He shoots again: three, four. The dogs stop barking.

One of the SLAVE CHASERs begin to sob.

SLAVE CHASER #1 (OFF)

You fuckin' you, you didn't have to kill my dogs!

SLAVE CHASER #2 (OFF)

C'mon man. Shit, I'm sorry, Bob.

COLORED WAITER (OFF)

Orders of masters Lucy'n'Ludwig. You have a problem, you can take it up with them.

The metal door slams shut.

The COLORED WAITER reenters with flecks of blood on his face and shirt. He crosses directly to the table where LUCY'N'LUDWIG are sitting with QUATROON.

COLORED WAITER

I hope this... *ambience*... will be more to your liking.

LUCY('N'LUDWIG)

Yes. Thank you, Garçon.

COLORED WAITER

Very well. Uh,

(*gesturing to QUATROON's dinner napkin*)

May I?

QUATROON signals he go ahead. The
 COLORED WAITER takes the napkin and
 wipes himself clean of the blood and then refolds
 it and places it back in place by QUATROON.
 When he's done, he exits again.

LUCY('N'LUDWIG)

Where were we?

Throw focus: the COLORED WAITER reenters
 with The Writers' food: Cajun-style barbecue
 chicken, all dark meat like legs and thighs. They
 eat voraciously. At first with knives and forks, but
 as the scene progresses, they get frustrated with
 their utensils and start using their hands to tear
 apart and devour the meat.

FLANNERY O'CONNOR enters in all black—
 very goth—and hurries over to the empty chair at
 the Writers' table. Her voice feels very classic
 Hollywood; all Southern sensibilities, vague as
 they may be.

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

You're late, Flannery.

FLANNERY O'CONNOR

A good parking spot is hard to find.

WILLIAMS FAULKNER

Leave her be, Thom. Happy to have you.

FLANNERY O'CONNOR

Happy to join you.

The COLORED WAITER comes over to check
 on them.

COLORED WAITER

'S everything all right here?

FLANNERY O'CONNOR

(grabbing the COLORED WAITER's arm as she speaks)

I'll have what they're having. But—could I get a smaller portion, please?

The COLORED WAITER nods and exits.

FLANNERY O'CONNOR

So what were we talkin' about?

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

I was just gonna tell Will that I think I've found an interesting young writer.

The metal door scrapes open again.

SLAVE CHASER #1 (OFF)

Oh, not you again. We even kept this one quiet. Made a gag using the fat from the last one you killed.

FLANNERY O'CONNOR

If I had a dime for every time someone said to me something about an interesting young writer...

Another shot.

SLAVE CHASER #1 (OFF)

Motherfucker!

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

Sure, but I'm not just any someone to you, am I?

The metal door slams shut again.

FLANNERY O'CONNOR

Oh, yeah, no, of course not.

WILLIAM FAULKNER

What about this young writer?

The COLORED WAITER comes back with FLANNERY O'CONNOR's smaller plate of Cajun-BBQ legs and thighs. She begins eating with her hands immediately.

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

The way he uses the Negro body, the way he manipulates the Negro plight in his works—

WILLIAM FAULKNER

Oh?

FLANNERY O'CONNOR

I'm intrigued...

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

He just—wait, I think I have a copy of his card, some[where]...

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS reaches under the table and pulls out a manuscript for *PLANTATIONLAND or slaves/slavers/countrymen* and slams it on the table between them.

WILLIAM FAULKNER and FLANNERY O'CONNOR take turns flipping through the manuscript with their chickengrease-stained and barbecue-sauced fingers, smudging the letters as they flip through it.

WILLIAM FAULKNER

Thom?

TENNESSEE WILLIAM

Yes?

WILLIAM FAULKNER looks at FLANNERY O'CONNOR like, "You see what I'm seeing, right?"

FLANNERY O'CONNOR

Thom, dear—

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

Call me Tennessee, please.

FLANNERY O'CONNOR

Okay, Tennessee...

WILLIAM FAULKNER

Thom, all the pages have a red 'X' slashed across them.

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

Yes, but it's all still legible. Flip through a few passages.

They oblige him.

WILLIAM FAULKNER

/ Mhmm. Mhmm. Mhmm.

FLANNERY O'CONNOR

Okay. Okay. Alright.

WILLIAM FAULKNER

Oh.

FLANNERY O'CONNOR

Oh wow.

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

Right?

FLANNERY O'CONNOR

I'll give it to you, Tennessee. The way he uses / the Negro body...

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

The Negro body, yes!

WILLIAM FAULKNER

It's so charged, it's so manipulative, it's so... capitalistic!

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

Yes, yes, exactly that! I'm telling you this colored boy was born free in the North, but has an ear for the Southern tradition. There's something so, so *American* about the impulse.

FLANNERY O'CONNOR

Well a colored boy can't actually be an American writer, can he?

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

No, no, of course not, but still I thought it was fun is all.

The COLORED WAITER enters carrying a
mini-prop of the Statue of Liberty on a silver tray.
He sings "Steal Away (to Jesus)" under his breath.

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

Look; a regular nigga singing God and carryin' America, if I ain't seen it all... before...
today...

An authorial epiphany. All three: TENNESSEE
WILLIAMS, WILLIAM FAULKNER, and
FLANNERY O'CONNOR stare hungrily at the
boy as he enters and exits.

Beat.

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

(throwin down loose singles)

/ You know, this has been swell, but well, I gotta be going, I think I just got an idea for a
new scene and I can't afford to lose it.

WILLIAM FAULKNER

(knocking over waters)

/ Thank you for the evening, it's been a pleasure, but I forgot I'm on deadline, there's this passage I think I just cracked wide open.

FLANNERY O'CONNOR

(shaking the table)

Lovely chatting, boys, really, but a character's come to me and they are creatures of temperament, he demands I follow him to the end of my newest story.

The three storm off in three different directions.

Throw focus: LUCY'N'LUDWIG are finishing their meal.

LUCY'N'LUDWIG

So give us a minute to run to the restroom.

Then the three of us can get on out of here.

Have a little fun for the evening, right?

And then—

Oh, let's not trouble ourselves with what has to come after. Let's just enjoy what we can while we can, huh?

They exit together to the restroom. Leaving QUATROON alone at the table. The COLORED WAITER re-enters. He and QUATROON catch each other's eyes.

QUATROON

Hey. Why were you carrying that statue?

COLORED WAITER

If I don't do it, who will?

QUATROON

Well, I don't know who you carryin' it for, but I extend thanks on they behalf.

COLORED WAITER

That's the only time anyone's ever thanked me for carryin' it.

QUATROON

Maybe they don't know to thank you.

COLORED WAITER

You mean like they don't know what I'm doing?

QUATROON

Right.

COLORED WAITER

How do I make 'em know, then?

QUATROON

First, you gotta make 'em see you.

COLORED WAITER

How do I make 'em see me?

QUATROON

*(looks off after the Bathroom, and looks back at the
COLORED WAITER)*

Well, that's the hard part. I'll let you know if I ever figure it out.

Lights down.

SCENE 10 – THE SOUTH,
THE PURSUERS PERSIST

MASSA JOHN rides in on HORSEBACK, FIA
walking alongside him.

MASSA JOHN

Your freedom would cost me a lot is all I'm saying. Can't we come to a... more reasonable agreement?

FIA

You want them four, my freedom is as low as I'll go.

MASSA JOHN

Where are they anyway?

FIA

They should be right about here right about now. Hold on, I need to think. Lemme get some canned corn.

She holds her hand out. MASSA JOHN doesn't
give her anything. She looks up at him, annoyed.

FIA

What now, John?

MASSA JOHN

We, uh, we out of food.

FIA

We outta what?

MASSA JOHN

I'm sorry! I didn't think it'd take so long to find them! They was supposed to be right here, right now. We wouldn't need no more food.

FIA

What about the trip back?

MASSA JOHN

Oh... that's right...

FIA

So we gon' keep movin', keep following the trail, but we gon' hunt while we go. Take out your gun.

MASSA JOHN takes it out, but he struggles to load and cock it.

FIA

You need some help with that?

MASSA JOHN

No, shut up. I've killed many a runaway slave for the bounty on they head, I know how to work a gun.

FIA

This why they say never work wit' a man who own slaves, 'cause if he own slaves, he don't know how to work hisself proper. Gimme the damn gun!

(she snatches the gun from MASSA JOHN)

And I'm keeping the lionshare of whatever I kill, too.

MASSA JOHN

Hold on, now, Fia, this disrespect—

She aims the gun at him.

MASSA JOHN

You know what? I'm not even that hungry, you *should* eat the lionshare.

FIA

What I thought...

FIA exits to the wing. MASSA JOHN remounts HORSEBACK and exits after her.

Lights down.

SCENE 11 – THE RUNAWAY TRAIL,
THE LOST ONES

CUNTROON, TYROON, and LADY BLACK-MOON, walking about, looking around, not quite sure where they are.

CUNTROON

That fork in the road got me all turned around.

LADY BLACK-MOON

You can't see no landmarks or nothing to orient us?

CUNTROON

How I'ma recognize a landmark? I ain't never been here before. So we just bide our time and wait and see if the stars come out. I could find where we goin' if I could just find the North Star.

Another group of three runaways stumbles into the scene.

CUNTROON

Hey! Y'all free?

They approach cautiously.

ZORA

That depends... Y'all free?

CUNTROON

Tentatively.

ZORA

So y'all runnin' too?

CUNTROON

In a way.

They suss each other out.

CUNTROON

My name is Cuntroon.

TYROON

I'm Tyroon.

LADY BLACK-MOON

And I'm Lady Black-Moon.

ZORA shakes each of their hands, the clear leader
of her clique.

ZORA

It's nice to meet y'all. I's Zora, this is Jhericurl-Drip Rick, and that there is Kane Goin'
West.

KANE GOIN' WEST

I'm God.

ZORA

Ignore him. He has a complex. I see where y'all runnin' from Plantationland.

CUNTROON

How you could tell?

ZORA

I could see it on your tag.

CUNTROON

Oh, yeah. Where y'all runnin' from?

ZORA

Woodland down there in Atlanta.

LADY BLACK-MOON

Kane goin' West, is all y'all goin' west, too?

ZORA

Yeah. Figure it might be more chance for us out that way. You wanna come with?

TYROON

Naw, I hear it's wild out there.

ZORA

Wilder than the South?

TYROON

Potentially.

CUNTROON

We really just need to figure which way is North. I usually could tell by the stars, but with my luck, ain't a star in the sky tonight.

KANE GOIN' WEST

That way is North.

They all look in the direction he points.

CUNTROON

You sure?

KANE GOIN' WEST

Positive. We headin' this way,

(points out to the audience)

which is west. So if you do the angles, that way gotta be North.

CUNTROON

Oh. Okay. Well, thank you.

KANE GOIN' WEST

Uh huh.

ZORA

Hey, y'all seem to have a whole lotta berries with y'all.

LADY BLACK-MOON

And y'all got three whole jugs of water.

A beat.

CUNTROON silently trades ZORA some leaves and berries for a jug of water.

ZORA

Thank you.

CUNTROON

Thank you.

CUNTROON nods at her two and they head off, exiting stage left.

ZORA

We better head on too, time is money is both something we ain't got.

They walk ever so little.

ZORA

Kane?

KANE GOIN' WEST

Uh huh?

ZORA

Is we supposed to see a coast on the horizon like that?

KANE GOIN' WEST

Um... yes?

They're not and they know they're not.

Lights down.

SCENE 12 – THE RUNAWAY TRAIL, SLEEPY HOLLOW

QUATROON lies asleep entangled in the roots of a far-reaching willow tree. There is a longhand letter lying unsealed on his chest, a wooden cross ornament is used as a paperweight to keep it down. As he sleeps, a HEADLESS HORSEMAN rides across the stage on HORSEBACK.

LUCY'N'LUDWIG enter and deliver an epistolary direct address...

LUCY'N'LUDWIG

Dear Nigga Q; you left imprinted on my chest a pigmented patch in the shape of the letter "Q" and on Ludwig's, the letter, "N."

(LUCY'N'LUDWIG open their shirts, each revealing their own black-hued scarlet letters)

We assume this is your way of leaving your mark on us, but why must we bear such fatal defects after dancing in the dirt with you?

Take your stain or be cursed a lonely life.

Not that we'd wish one upon you.

But that karma compels us.

We've loved you, surely, you know that.

But love beads free from folk like you as easily as oil from water.

Oil from soap.

Insidious is the complexion of your seed, spilled fraught and overwrought in my remembrance.

May memories be cherished if so they are held...

But hell hath no fury like white-water wells
 Don't drink
 Or do
 But if indeed you do
 You're trusted to know the risks. Subjugatory Bodies like yours are not meant to be loved.
 Not by governing bodies like our own.
 I see stories of America past
 And I of America present
 None of which we can share with one another, want as we might...
 Because, by nature,
 Never the two can meet.
 Lest nature be savage
 And savagery natural.
 'Twould be civilian surrender to those worst parts of ourselves.
 And all men know surrenders repeat.
 XO: Your lordly sheperds from a life-past
 Your dearest and fearest,
 Lucy'n'Ludwig.
 LUCYN'LUDWIG exit together, arm in arm.
 HORSEBACK approaching...
 QUATROON stirs and wakes up from his
 stupor. He feels the weight of the cross on his
 chest.
 QUATROON
 What the hell?
 He notices both the cross and the letter it's
 holding down. He moves the weight and tries to
 read the letter.
 He tries sounding the words out to himself, but
 he's unsuccessful. He's disappointed. He tucks the
 letter away.
 He gets up and brushes himself off. He looks
 around. He's not sure where he is.
 QUATROON
 Shit.

HORSEBACK gets louder and enters. With
MASSA JOHN still piggybacking and FIA
walking alongside them.

MASSA JOHN

Finally, here they go.

QUATROON

What they?

MASSA JOHN

You and... where is all the other ones?

QUATROON shrugs.

MASSA JOHN

Goddammit, Fia!

FIA

What, according to their plans, they were supposed to stick together.

(reading off the paper, but pointed at QUATROON)

No. Matter. What.

QUATROON

Yeah, that was the plan... But then we lost the plans, so.

FIA facepalms.

MASSA JOHN

How did you get those plans, Fia?

FIA

Quatroon here gave them to me.

MASSA JOHN

And Quatroon, tell me, you say you gave those plans to Fia?

QUATROON

Yes, sir, I did.

MASSA JOHN

And, perchance, were those your only copy of the plans?

QUATROON

Yes, sir, they were.

MASSA JOHN

/ Fuckin' idiot.

FIA

Fuckin' idiot.

MASSA JOHN

Well, one of four ain't bad and at this rate, my guess is that all the others are dead anyway. Do you think that's a fair guess, Quatroon? Since they runnin' around without any plan of any kind.

QUATROON

Yes, sir, I would say that's probably fair.

MASSA JOHN

What do you say we all three head on back down to Hell County, then?

FIA

I thought you said if we found them, I would get my freedom.

MASSA JOHN

"Them" being the operative word, Fia. I hate to be a semanticist, but this group is looking mighty thin to constitute a "them," don't you think?

FIA

What good are the other three dead?

MASSA JOHN

Fine, we'll talk about it once we get back to Hell County.

MASSA JOHN ties QUATROON's wrists. And then he gets on HORSEBACK.

MASSA JOHN

I'll even let you walk behind me to show ya how much I trust ya. Y'all don't follow too far behind me, though; if one of you's try to escape, I'll kill the both of you because I'm tired and I don't think you even worth all that. Understood?

QUATROON

Yes, sir.

FIA

Understood.

He exits on HORSEBACK.

FIA

Quatroon?

QUATROON

Yeah?

FIA

Why'd you give me those plans? You was tryin' to trick me, wasn't you?

QUATROON

No.

FIA

Then why?

QUATROON

I wanted you to come be free with us. I know you say you ain't never seen none but Hell County. I wanted you to see that not everywhere is like Hell County.

FIA

Is that what you found?

QUATROON

Well, we walkin' back now, so I don't know. I'm still findin', I guess.

They exit. Following after MASSA JOHN and HORSEBACK.

Lights down.

SCENE 13 – THE NORTH, AN ABOLITIONIST RALLY

Just a chair and a podium onstage.

An ABOLITIONIST SPEAKER walks on with
an OSTENSIBLY FREE BLACK WOMAN.
They wear matching wedding bands.

They whisper among themselves while we, the
audience, wait on his speech.

ABOLITIONIST SPEAKER

You promise you're not gonna run while I give my speech.

OSTENSIBLY FREE BLACK WOMAN

I promise.

ABOLITIONIST SPEAKER

Okay, because you can't run.

OSTENSIBLY FREE BLACK WOMAN

I won't.

ABOLITIONIST SPEAKER

It's an optics thing.

OSTENSIBLY FREE BLACK WOMAN

Okay.

ABOLITIONIST SPEAKER

Okay?

OSTENSIBLY FREE BLACK WOMAN

Okay.

ABOLITIONIST SPEAKER

Okay. I love you.

OSTENSIBLY FREE BLACK WOMAN

Okay. Whatever.

He works hard to give her a kiss on the cheek, she works even harder to avoid this.

He gives up, makes the "mwah" sound anyway in empty air, and approaches the podium

Behind them, a sign reads, "The American Anti-Slavery League – Annual Conference"

He looks back every so often to make sure she hasn't run.

ABOLITIONIST SPEAKER

Freedom is not a gift bestowed upon us by other men, but a right that belongs to us by the laws of God and nature.² Slavery is the root of almost all the troubles of the present and the fears for the future.³ Americans are so enamored of equality that they would rather be equal in slavery than unequal in freedom... The subjection of individuals will increase among democratic nations such as our own, not only in proportion as their equality, but in the same proportion as their ignorance.⁴

² John Webbe, "On Government No. I", *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, 1 April 1736

³ John Quincy Adams, in an interview with Alexis de Tocqueville

⁴ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 1835-1840

We, then, are not fighting against slavery, but against ignorance. We are not fighting against the present moment, but against history itself. I have children who, themselves, could one day be enslaved. I have brothers who, themselves, could one day be enslaved. The enslavement of the American Negro is the enslavement of the American first and foremost and it should be interpreted as such. An attack on the American Negro is an attack on me. Me! Me! Me! Abolition is an American doctrine, abolition is the future foundation of our moral identity. Abolition today, abolition tomorrow, abolition forever!

No one cheers, or claps, or even so much as responds.

ABOLITIONIST SPEAKER
(out the side of his mouth)

Uh, Baby?

No response.

ABOLITIONIST SPEAKER
(Ibid.)

Baby?

OSTENSIBLY FREE BLACK WOMAN

What?

ABOLITIONIST SPEAKER
(Ibid.)

They not responding. Why they not clapping?

OSTENSIBLY FREE BLACK WOMAN

I don't know. Maybe they didn't hear you.

ABOLITIONIST SPEAKER
No, that's not it. They're blind. They're blind to the horrors. Well, I'll show them. I'll show them so hard.

OSTENSIBLY FREE BLACK WOMAN
Can we go home now? I'm 'bout ready to slip some rat poison in your soup.

ABOLITIONIST SPEAKER
Haha, oh, baby, you crack me up, always with the jokes, you. Yeah, let's go on home. I got to find some runaways to help our cause anyway.

They exit, leaving the podium unattended to.

ABOLITIONIST SPEAKER
I hate to ask, but: is that what you wearin' to the mixer, baby?

An unseen audience applauds at their departure.

Lights down.

SCENE 14 – THE RUNAWAY TRAIL,
ON THE WAY BACK TO HELL COUNTY

FIA, QUATROON, and MASSA JOHN on
HORSEBACK enter the scene.

MASSA JOHN

Alright, lemme down, Horseback.

He does.

MASSA JOHN

We been goin' a while, y'all, and I'm gettin' to feel tired.

FIA

Why you don't go on and rest?

MASSA JOHN

I feel like y'all would pull sumn while I'm restin' my eyes.

QUATROON

I wish. But Cuntroon was the brains and Lady Black-Moon was the quick one. Me? I'm just a writer.

MASSA JOHN

You could read and write too? / Is it a secret school or sumn?

QUATROON

Not yet. But hopefully one day. You know I be worth more to you if I could read and write.

FIA

'Specially since he can't read and write hisself.

QUATROON

Sir, you don't know how to read?

MASSA JOHN

Okay, Fia! I don't need you spreadin' my business like that.

FIA

Wouldn't be no business if you just took the time to learn. Lord knows the opportunity is waitin' there for you.

MASSA JOHN

Okay, okay! I'ma go head and rest my eyes. Y'all keep a eye on Horseback. 'Cause if y'all keep boiling my blood like y'all doin', you might not make it back to Hell County.

FIA

You gonna figure out the gun, are you?

MASSA JOHN

No but I brought a hefty amount of rope and I'll remind you that we are in the woods.

Okay?

MASSA JOHN walks upstage, finds a spot on the ground he feels is comfortable enough and he lays down to sleep. He starts snoring pretty immediately.

FIA brushes HORSEBACK. She holds a carrot in her opposite hand.

FIA

I'm sorry you gotta walk under the weight of that white man.

HORSEBACK

I'm sorry you do, too.

FIA is shook.

FIA

What? What did you just say?

He doesn't say anything. He eats the carrot that FIA is feeding him.

FIA

Quatroon?

QUATROON

Huh?

FIA

You heard this horse say something?

QUATROON

Nah, I ain't heard him say nothing.

FIA

Oh. Okay then...

QUATROON

You know, I wish you'd gotten to run with us.

FIA

How come you weren't with the others?

QUATROON

I stayed behind. They kept going.

FIA

Why'd you stay behind?

QUATROON

I fell in love.

FIA

You fell in love?

QUATROON

Yeah, I fell in love.

FIA

What happened to the person you fell in love with?

QUATROON

I think I got lost from them. I don't know where they went. They left me this note, though.

FIA

What's it say?

QUATROON

I don't know. It's a lot of words in it. I can't read them all.

FIA

Would you want me to read it? I could tell you what it says?

QUATROON

Sure.

QUATROON hands her the note. She unfolds it and reads through it. QUATROON looks on at her excitedly.

At first, she's sad as she reads, but then she notices QUATROON looking and feigns good news.

QUATROON

Anything good?

FIA

Uh, you know, it's a lot of words, but basically, you know, it's like "you left a mark on them, they love you, uh, they'll always remember you." So on and so forth.

QUATROON

Really? Thanks a lot, Fia.

FIA

Of course.

She returns the letter to him and he tucks it
loosely away.

FIA

Hey, Quatroon?

QUATROON

Yeah?

FIA

I wanted to say thank you for trying. To help me come with y'all.

QUATROON

Oh, you're my friend. I wanted you to be free too.

FIA

Now, we're both headed on back to Hell County.

QUATROON

Yeah, but now I know he can't read. I might forge my freedom papers and make him sign them 'cause he don't know no better.

FIA

Might not be no need.

QUATROON

What do you mean?

Murmurs from off.

Suddenly, CUNTROON, TYROON, and LADY
BLACK-MOON burst into the scene.
CUNTROON and TYROON are arguing.

CUNTROON

No, I'm telling you this ain't no North.

TYROON

How you know?

CUNTROON

'Cause I know. You can't trust no crazy man.

TYROON

See, that's your problem, you just don't trust men.

CUNTROON

Is this 'cause you think I don't trust you, Tyroon? / 'Cause I don't.

TYROON

I don't care, I don't fuckin' care, Cuntroon, it's not like I love you or something.

CUNTROON

Who said you loved me?

QUATROON

Hey, guys!

They all turn and see Quatroon.

CUNTROON

Motherfucker.

TYROON

Okay, so maybe we're not in the North.

LADY BLACK-MOON and TYROON run and hug QUATROON.

TYROON

Hey, buddy!

LADY BLACK-MOON

Quatroon, thank god, I can't stand being alone with those two anymore.

CUNTROON

Hey, Quatroon. Fia.

FIA

Hey y'all.

LADY BLACK-MOON

What you doin' all the way out here from Plantationland?

FIA nods at MASSA JOHN.

TYROON

Oh, shit, is that Massa John?

She nods yes.

CUNTROON

I knew that fuckin' Kane was gon' lead us right back into fuckin' slavery!

LADY BLACK-MOON

Nah, girl, I ain't goin' back.

CUNTROON

Well, what choice we got now?

FIA

I got an idea.

CUNTROON

You do?

(whispering)

Careful y'all, she might start whispering her story again.

FIA

No, girl, c'mon, I'm workin' on that. But I was thinking. Lady Black-Moon, you good with makeup, right?

LADY BLACK-MOON

Sure, I'm pretty good.

FIA

Good, that's what I was hoping for.

Lights down.

A practical beat.

Lights back up. FIA had red marks all about her face. It's really just lipstick.

QUATROON

You think this'll work?

FIA

It's worth a try. 'Sides I think I'm a pretty good actress. I might end up on a stage somewhere someday. Okay, now, y'all got everything?

CUNTROON

Yeah, we good to go.

FIA

Good, then go. Y'all bet not stay here wastin' nobody time.

LADY BLACK-MOON

This is real good of you, Fia.

FIA

What "good of me"? Psh, girl, I'm just helpin' my friends. Now go on.

LADY BLACK-MOON

Okay, okay, okay.

LADY BLACK-MOON, CUNTROON, and
TYROON exit.

QUATROON stays back and gives FIA a hug.

QUATROON

Hey, thanks for this, Fia.

FIA

Man, thank you, Q.

QUATROON

You think you'll ever get your freedom?

FIA

Oh, yeah, I got a trick or two up my sleeve.

QUATROON

Good.

QUATROON runs off after the other three. He
drops the letter from Lucy'n'Ludwig.

FIA

Hey, Quatroon, you forgot your...

And all of a sudden, she decides to not give it back to him. She folds it and tucks it away someplace safe.

She looks over at MASSA JOHN, who's still sleeping. More gently now. She sighs to herself. Begins practicing.

FIA

"Oh, Massa John suh, I'm sorry suh, I don't know whuh happened they just snuck up on me like animals and oh, the last thing I remember is a big black figure bearin' down on lil' ole me."

Lights down.

SCENE 15 – THE NORTH,
THE AMERICAN ANTI-SLAVERY LEAGUE ANNUAL ABOLITION MIXER

QUATROON, CUNTROON, TYROON, & LADY BLACK-MOON wander into a prom-type party.

A half-drunk 2-liter generic brand Coca-Cola sits in a bucket of melted ice.

The punch bowl has various small containers of liquor around it and an emptied bag of ice beneath it; the punch itself is a pale red color.

THE ABOLITIONISTS dance drunkenly. NICK silently schmoozes among them.

QUATROON and TYROON drink thirstily from the punch bowl while CUNTROON and LADY BLACK-MOON drink from the 2-liter Coke.

They all, exhausted, collapse to the floor right in front of the refreshments table.

QUATROON

Phew.

TYROON

My feet y'all, my feet hurtin' like a muhg in these Timbs, boy. Damn.

TYROON kicks off his boots and massages his newly-developed corns/blisters.

TYROON

Jeez-uhs, man.

CUNTROON

You ain't lyin', shit, I'm tired as I ever been in my life.

QUATROON has curled into a ball and dozed off.

TYROON

Q is out.

LADY BLACK-MOON

I don't blame him. I'm ready to die just so I could take a nap.

ABOLITIONIST SPEAKER enters with OSTENSIBLY FREE BLACK WOMAN walking alongside him. They work the party a bit. Schmooze and such.

TYROON

Where are we anyway?

CUNTROON spots the sign hanging from above and reads it aloud.

CUNTROON

"The American Anti-Slavery League Annual Abolition Mixer."

TYROON

So these must be friends, right?

CUNTROON

I hope so. We done drank up all they sodas.

ABOLITIONIST SPEAKER snakes his way over. He offers his hand.

ABOLITIONIST SPEAKER

Hi, I don't think we've had the pleasure to meet. I just gave that speech out there.

CUNTROON

Oh, yeah, and what a lovely speech it was. We're fans.

ABOLITIONIST SPEAKER

Always a pleasure meeting fans. I didn't catch your names.

CUNTROON

I'm Cuntroon.

TYROON

Tyroon.

LADY BLACK-MOON

Lady Black-Moon.

ABOLITIONIST SPEAKER

Nice to meet you all.

CUNTROON

And that's Quatroon.

QUATROON sleeps on.

ABOLITIONIST SPEAKER

This is my wife.

OSTENSIBLY FREE BLACK WOMAN

Pleasure.

LADY BLACK-MOON

Charmed.

There's a weird silent posh-off between them.

ABOLITIONIST SPEAKER

You all are free, right? Pro-Abolition I assume.

CUNTROON

Wouldn't make sense for us to be against, would it?

ABOLITIONIST SPEAKER

Hey, we're happy y'all are free and we wanna see you stay that way.

He ushers them out from the party. Someone drags QUATROON along. In their wake, WHITE ABOLITIONISTS eat and drink and dance and enjoy the festivities.

Lights down.

SCENE 16 – THE RUNAWAY TRAIL,
MASSA JOHN WAKES UP

MASSA JOHN and FIA are mid-argument after
he's woken up.

MASSA JOHN

What do you mean they got away?

FIA

They got away, what was I supposed to do? It was four of them and one of me. I tried, really I did, if only for my own freedom. / Look, the scars on my face!

MASSA JOHN

(he in that berserk angry white man mode now)

Fuck! That means we had all four, Fia! Goddammit! And we can't even go on after them because we don't have food or money enough. Shit!

FIA

Well, if you—

MASSA JOHN

No! No!

A turn. The power in the scene shifts. And this translates to their actions and postures as well.

FIA's not snide anymore, and JOHN isn't as aw-shucks stupid as he's been.

MASSA JOHN

I dealt with your shit 'cause I thought I was getting all my workin' niggas back, but you fuckin', you worthless, you let them slip through your lazy nigger fuckin' fingers. I should rip your fuckin' fingers off one by one and make you eat them is what I should do, you dense, dirty son of a, agh. That way no more of my-my-my money or my property can slip through them. I'm so fuckin'—

He throws something as angry white men are wont to do.

MASSA JOHN

You know something? That story you like to tell? About your grandmamma and your mama cuttin' cane?

FIA

Alright, come on now, let's go on back to Hell County.

MASSA JOHN

No, no, no, no. You like tellin' your story, right? Keep you feeling something in your soul, right? To know that no matter how bad it got your grandmother held tight to your mom and your mom held tight to you.

Well, I always thought that story was funny is all. Like Uncle Tom's Cabin funny. Or Nigger Jim funny. 'Cause your grandmamma lived her last days on Plantationland. I know 'cause I was a boy then. And your mama did too, but I was older by her time. But, what's funny is that they was both lazy workers like you, Fia. Ain't that a hoot? Lazyness, it turns out, is hereditary—something you get by blood from your parents. Like eye color or class. How could they have held you, Fia? When they didn't meet quota, they was whipped until they back was more gristle than flesh and then hung in the sun to dry. Even Samson with steel skin couldn't hold no baby the way we beat them two. I mean, I'm a God-fearing man by birth, don't get me wrong, but watching what they—what we—did to your mom and your grandmom made me a man-fearing man by practice. Only thing scarier than God is the Devil, only thing scarier than The Devil is a property owning white man and that's the truth I seen on the day your family died. You wasn't held by your mama, Fia. You was held by a house-slave, doubtless somebody like Lady Black-Moon who you, oh-so-cavalierly let run free while your grandmamma and mama was left out cakin' in the sun.

And you know? This version of the story not funny to me. Honest. Not at all. Which is why I respect your ability as a storyteller, you know? To take something that gruesome and that godforsaken and that grotesque and turn it into something that could make a stern man crease up. That's a gift. That's a God-given gift. But you gotta be careful with a gift. I ain't never collect no gift myself. But, you see, if God is busy giving you gifts, it means he's not giving you protection and a gift can't wake you up in the morning, can it? It can't keep you safe at night, neither then, right? Wary of the shells you walk on Fia. They might just slice on you when they break.

He extends his arm, gesturing for FIA to lead the way back to Plantationland/Hell County.

She does indeed walk ahead of him.

HORSEBACK, with his head hung low, walks over to where MASSA JOHN is standing.

He hops on HORSEBACK and rides off, following FIA's lead.

Lights down.

SCENE 17 – THE NORTH,
SIMULATED MUTILATION SCENE

The Fugitives are on stage, chained at both the wrist and feet.

They're like this a few moments.

QUATROON

Okay, I'm just gonna say it: I don't think they really wanna see us stay free.

TYROON

What gave you that fuckin' idea, Quatroom? That they put us in literal fuckin' chains?

QUATROON

Well, yeah, for starters.

CUNTROON

I'm more wantin' to know what this "Simulated Mutilation Scene" is supposed to look like.

TYROON

Ah man, I gotta shit and can't even shit 'cause / they got us all chained together.

CUNTROON

Yeah, you better not. Not while you chained to me.

LADY BLACK-MOON

No, but like we supposed to be a attraction at the party. Or was it a rally?

ABOLITIONIST SPEAKER enters.

ABOLITIONIST SPEAKER

You all ready for your moment of glory?

TYROON

Does it come with a bathroom break?

ABOLITIONIST SPEAKER

Oh, people gon' be shittin' themselves.

(he shouts off behind him)

Let 'em in.

OSTENSIBLY FREE BLACK WOMAN ushers
in a group of ABOLITIONISTS, NICK is among
them.

ABOLITIONIST SPEAKER

Thank you all for joining us. What we got in store is something of simulated show for y'all. Trigger warning: slavery and slavery related violence. And... action!

ABOLITIONIST SPEAKER takes a breath and assumes his role. He uses a light rope as a "whip."

ABOLITIONIST SPEAKER

Ah, yes, I'm uh Southern suhlave ownuh. Look at me, ownin' slaves and bein' Suhthun Fried chickin and sweet tea tatters.

Oh wha's dis I see? Ah, yes, my property, my human property—well why don't I, inhumane soul as I am:

WHIP! them
and...
WHIP! them
and...
WHIP! them
and...

OSTENSIBLY FREE BLACK WOMAN stops him.

OSTENSIBLY FREE BLACK WOMAN

They not into it.

ABOLITIONIST SPEAKER

What do you mean they not into it?

They look out to the audience of ABOLITIONISTs gathered around. They're all disinterested in the spectacle.

OSTENSIBLY FREE BLACK WOMAN

Like they're bored.

ABOLITIONIST SPEAKER

How can they be bored? We're trying to free slaves here!

OSTENSIBLY FREE BLACK WOMAN

Yeah, but you gotta make that point while. While being entertaining, you know?

ABOLITIONIST SPEAKER

How can I?

LADY BLACK-MOON starts singing Steal Away
[to Jesus] to herself.

ABOLITIONIST SPEAKER gets an idea.

ABOLITIONIST SPEAKER
Hey, what would y'all think of recording a song or two?

CUNTROON
A song?

ABOLITIONIST SPEAKER
Yeah, for abolition sake.

CUNTROON
I don't know.

ABOLITIONIST SPEAKER
We'll even let you write a song of your own.

QUATROON lights up at this.

ABOLITIONIST SPEAKER
Ah, he's into it!

TYROON
(whispering)
I don't know, y'all, we really gonna write a song?

LADY BLACK-MOON
Negro, if it get us free, we gon' rewrite the Bill of Rights.

CUNTROON
We're in. On one condition.

ABOLITIONIST SPEAKER
Name it.

CUNTROON
You gotta let us free from these chains. Can't think or perform good if you got chains on you.

ABOLITIONIST SPEAKER
You heard her.

Other ABOLITIONISTS unlock their chains and
let them free.

ABOLITIONIST SPEAKER

Now, if you'll be so kind as to follow me. I got some recording equipment in my office.

The Fugitives follow ABOLITIONIST SPEAKER and OSTENSIBLY FREE BLACK WOMAN as instructed.

So does NICK...

Lights down.

SCENE 18 – THE NORTH,
7-INCH SIDE A

The four stand onstage-onstage: each assigned to a different band-based role—

QUATROON is the standing lead singer and also lead guitarist he's got a Goldtop Gibson Les Paul, c. late 60s;

TYROON is the drummer, he uses his Timb to kick the bass drum to compensate for a missing drum pedal he's on a Rick Allen-like setup: Pearl drums, Ludwig drum kit, Paiste's RUDE/2002 cymbal lines, & Black Beauty Super Sensitive snare.

CUNTROON is on bass guitar where she stands a little up of QUATROON, but down of TYROON. She fingers expertly up and down a Fender Precision Bass ('69 model or later)—mostly muted browns and similar dark colors, but with flecks of white in the marbling texture.

Last but not least, LADY BLACK-MOON is on an electric keyboard-based synthesizer: a modified, modernized Moog Minimoog (less wood-tones, more sleek looking).

—all three instrumentalists sing backup as necessary for the following song, and they all play heartedly.

The ABOLITIONIST SPEAKER stands looking over their recording session. He speaks into that mic that sound engineers do.

ABOLITIONIST SPEAKER

Hey, y'all ready to record? We ain't got much time. It's gettin' crazy out there.

QUATROON

We ready.

ABOLITIONIST SPEAKER

You all got Quatroon lyrics committed to memory?

They all give a thumbs up gesture.

ABOLITIONIST SPEAKER

Good. Ready tape? Rolling.

QUATROON

(into the mic; an ad-lib)

Remember this?
You already know who it is.

Aesthetically, feel-wise, this is Nirvana playing
Smells Like Teen Spirit.

The Fugees begin playing the instrumental
backing.

QUATROON

As I ride up the countryside, I see: chattel cattle-grazing
We march on Washington ; I have a dream, I dreamed a dream worth chasing
That makes us The Miserables and they say that misery loves company
Ten million strong, hell hath no fury and furiously has come for me
If I'm Massa, this satanic shit is fun for me
This maze is messy, unh, this maze is amazing, unh,
Rip off your second face to see what I'm facing:

'Cause love is a grave sin, greed is a grave sin, pride is a grave sin, unh
The self is a grave sin, health is a grave sin, new wealth is a grave sin, unh
The sword is a grave sin, the pen is a grave sin, the grapes of wrath are a grave sin
The punkists decided avunculicide is a grave sin-

*(an UNCLE SAM cosplayer runs on stage;
a RUNAWAY SLAVE cosplayer runs on after him—
UNCLE SAM doesn't know where/which way to go)*

-But Uncle Sam, I'm coming with a knife, pulse racing!

*(the RUNAWAY SLAVE chases UNCLE SAM off,
brandishing a rusted knife)*

Da, da, dat, hoo-hoo
da, da, da, ooo

*(A small CONFEDERATE ARMY enters, up in arms;
they shout battle cries and subtle declarations of war)*

Da, da, dat, doo-doo
da, da, da, do

(the group of CONFEDERATE MEN rile each other up)

Da, da, da, shoo-shoo
da, da, da, shoot
Da, da, da, dun-dun
da, da, da, done

I pray for the Civil War: a new American juncture

*(a small UNION ARMY arises to challenge the
CONFEDERATE ARMY)*

An angel sickle swung for a change—I'm sick o' seein' hung lungs punctured
Gray uniforms shout no unification

(CONFEDERATES shout)

A nation character needs a vacation

*(The CIVIL WAR begins—or, rather, some approximation
of it, each man's gun fires off blanks...)*

*(Instead of visceral, viscous blood, the men pull red scarves
from their collars and sleeves to signal death and blood
spilling)*

I'm patient, plea-fully patient
For years, and years, and years, and years
I'm patient, mourning, and patient
For years, and years, and years, and years
I'm waiting, shuckin' and jivin', and waiting
But what am I waiting for?
A knock on my door...

(knock-on-my-door!)

*(ROBERT E. LEE waves a white flag, surrendering to an
unseen-to-us ULYSSES S. GRANT at the Appomattox
Court House, Virginia, 1865.)*

A knock on my door...

(knock-on-my-door!)

(JEFFERSON DAVIS, in a gesture of renege, shakes hands with ABRAHAM LINCOLN—DAVIS wears Southern debutante white gloves, LINCOLN does not...)

A knock on my door...

(knock-on-my-door!)

A knock on my door...

'Cause love is a grave sin, greed is a grave sin, pride is a grave sin

*(a mini-scene set, around/between their performance:
LINCOLN and MARY TODD sit spectating a show we
can't see)*

The war is over and freedom allegedly won

But Lincoln, baby; baby, what have you done?

(JOHN WILKES BOOTH sneaks in behind the pair)

Watch on the box, in the box, Booth draws his gun

*(BOOTH draws his gun; wait, wait, wait...
& he shoots LINCOLN. Point-blank BANG!)*

Lincoln's body slumps over, limp—

*& then, MARY TODD silently distraught,
mourns over her husband's dead body)*

—American chaos: boy, this is fun

(Lights down on Lincoln's Assassination Scene.)

CUNTROON/TYROON/LADY BLACK-MOON

/ (Boy, this-is-fun!)

/ (Boy, this-is-fun!)

/ (Boy, this-is-fun!)

/ (Boy, this-is-fun!)

/ (Boy, this-is-fun!)

*(and so on they refrain, through the following verse
QUATROON sings)*

QUATROON

*(harmonizing with and vocalizing against his backup
singers)*

Boy, this is fun!

Ooo

This is fun, fun

This is fun for me

Don't rain on our happy house,—

don't tread on our happy house, —

drinks are on the happy house, woah-oh,
 Don't tear down our happy house
 Don't throw stones at our happy house
 Our happy house is well kept,
 I've slept so comfortably
 Our happy house is well kept,
 I've slept so comfortably
 Our happy house is well kept,
 I've slept so soundly
 The present-past surrounds me
 All you all astound me

Dead men sing no songs,
 so I'll sing mine
 Dead men sing no songs,
 so I'll sing

Dead men sing no songs,
 so I'll sing mine
 Dead men sing no songs,
 so I'll sing—

*(ALL LIGHTS UP IN A SUDDEN NEAR-BLINDING
 WHITE GLOW that begins onstage and extends outward
 toward the audience—this is the climactic set-piece of a
 mega-concert...)*

*Suddenly, all the black bodies of the cast are onstage with
 THE FUGEES, singing "Lift Ev'ry Voice"—riffing and
 soulful as black church singers are wont to do:)*

—'Till earth and heav'n ring
 Ring with the har-mo-nies of li-ber-ty

Let our re-joi-cing rise
 High as the list'ning skies
 Let it resound high as the ro-lling sea

Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us
 Sing a song full of the hope—

ABOLITIONIST SPEAKER stops the track and
 lights return to normal. Black Bodies that weren't
 in the scene before the song exit.

ABOLITIONIST SPEAKER

I think that should be good. You were getting a little “uplift” there at the end. You wanna watch and curtail that. The last thing you want is to uplift people, you know?

I got my guy coming in. I wanna play it for him. See what he thinks.

A&R GUY comes in. He’s dressed completely contemporarily. He should have a real P. Diddy air about him.

A&R GUY

It’s good. But it’s by itself, you know? That’s not gon’ have the greatest impact, right? What you need—you got the, y’know wha’m sayin’, you got the crank the volume up and buss up your whole gramophone speaker setup summertime hit, right? But what you need is the soft song, you know? The earworm, the slow burn, the make-ya-pants-wet sticky-icky slow jam to pair it wit’. You get Top 40 *and* Urban Contemporary. All of a sudden, your artist and your label got a buzz on it, y’know wha’m sayin’?

ABOLITIONIST SPEAKER

Yeah, yeah, I think so. But I don’t think they have a slow jam in them. That’s gotta be sad, right? Things have been so good for them here.

A&R GUY

It ain’t gotta be new. They could do a cover.

ABOLITIONIST SPEAKER

Oh. A cover. I like that. A cover of what?

A&R GUY

I got just the song for it.

ABOLITIONIST SPEAKER

Cool. Cool. Oh, yo, that Civil War, crazy right?

A&R GUY

Crazy, man.

ABOLITIONIST SPEAKER

We lucky we lived through it.

A&R GUY

Praise be. I’m just happy it’s calm now. Nothing to worry about.

Lights down.

SCENE 19 – THE NORTH,

7-INCH SIDE B

Inside the recording studio again.
 ABOLITIONIST SPEAKER speaks from off,
 using the sound engineer mic.

ABOLITIONIST SPEAKER (OFF)

Your record's poised to be a hit! Press-projected to debut at number one!

TYROON

Doin' mighty well in the North states, huh?

ABOLITIONIST SPEAKER (OFF)

Sure, but it's doing *really* fuckin' well in the former Confederate ones.

THE FUGITIVES

What?

ABOLITIONIST SPEAKER (OFF)

Yea. I can see it. Switch out some of the words and it's basically a battle song for the C.S.A. — "chattel" for "good men"; "Massa" for "Lincoln"; keep that whole theme about a morally inept Uncle Sam. Your words are basically sharp enough to slice Lincoln's head off by themselves, no Booth or bullet necessary.

LADY BLACK-MOON

Well, ain't that a blimp...

ABOLITIONIST SPEAKER (OFF)

A sale's a sale.

CUNTROON

It matters who's hearin' it.

NICK appears from somewhere unexpected—in a nearby window if one exists, or if not, he descends from above; unceremoniously and with little fanfare.

NICK

(*whispering*)

Hey, I know y'all finna record another song, but you know, if you gon' be real big, you should probably have representation. I heard the first song. Brilliant. Best I ever heard. Here's my card.

He hands them a cope of *PLANTATIONLAND*
or *slaves/slavers/countrymen*. There's a big, bright
'X' on every page.

CUNTROON

It seem like people don't like your work too good.

NICK

Oh, what? No don't mind that. What's important is that we could have a very good, very
profitable—okay, moderately profitable—relationship, with one another. You need someone
with a higher up view looking out for you.

ABOLITIONIST SPEAKER (OFF)

What y'all doin' in there? Y'all ready to record?

NICK

Just keep me in mind is all. Think 'the money.'

NICK sneaks off.

LADY BLACK-MOON

Yeah, we ready.

ABOLITIONIST SPEAKER (OFF)

Okay, good. Ready tape? Rolling.

You know it, you love it: *Footsteps in the Dark Pt.*
1 & 2 by The Isley Brothers.

LADY BLACK-MOON is a swooning kinda
singer...

LADY BLACK-MOON

Are we really sure?
Can a run that lasted for so long, still endure?
Do you really care?
Hey, Hey—
Let's talk about the distractions goin' on elsewhere

I keep hearin' footsteps baby (in, the, dark)
In the dark, (oh) in the dark
Why'I keep hearin' footsteps baby (in, the, dark)
In the dark, in the dark

My mind drifts now and then
Lookin' down dark corridors and wonders what might have been

Something's up ahead
 Hey—
 Should I keep this same direction
 Or go back instead?

I keep hearin' footsteps baby (in, the, dark)
(spot up on 1 HOODED KLANSMAN)

In the dark, (oh) in the dark
(spot up on a 2nd HOODED KLANSMAN)

Why-I keep hearin' footsteps baby
*(spot up on a 3rd and final HOODED KLANSMAN;
 as this spot goes up, the three KLANSMEN dance in time to
 the music: backup dancers for THE FUGEES)*

In the dark, in the dark

Honey, now let's stop walkin' around
 When there's no love lost to be found
 And you know I still fear, I still fear
 What's the sense in goin' elsewhere?

*(leave 30 or so seconds for an interluding guitar or synth riff,
 during which the ABOLITIONISTS come out and start
 vibing individually to the song)*

(TYROON sneaks off.) ...

Who feels really sure?

Can that freedom guarantee your happiness shall endure?
*(here, the ABOLITIONISTS begin to dance in sync with the
 KLANSMEN—again, all backing up THE FUGEES.)*

*(While they're caught in the dance, CUNTROON tiptoes
 out in the same direction as TYROON.)*

And do we, really care?

Hey-hey—

Let's look at what's been happ-nin' and try to be more aware

*(Ks + As begin singing along to the chorus, off-tune, falling
 out of sync and eventually just clumsily, drunkenly dancing
 with one another, an unchoreographed circus around LADY
 BLACK-MOON as she sings this final chorus:)*

I keep hearin' footsteps baby

*(QUATROON makes his way out as well; lights are reduced
 to a spot on LADY BLACK-MOON and one on the men
 about her.)*

In the dark, yeah, in the dark
 Why-hih keep hearin' footsteps baby
 In the dark (oh) in the dark

Hoo!

*(a hard button that takes out LADY BLACK-MOON's
 spotlight.)*

The KLANSMEN and ABOLITIONISTS all
 applaud raucously, singing the chorus out of time
 among themselves.

THE ABOLITIONISTS

Encore! Encore! Encore! Encore!

Under their hoods/masks, the KLANSMEN
 shout unintelligibly what must be equally effusive
 demands for more.

The lights go up in full, and while the band's
 instruments remain onstage, its constituent
 members are nowhere to be found.

ABOLITIONIST SPEAKER

What the—?

ANOTHER ABOLITIONIST

Where did they go?

ABOLITIONIST SPEAKER

Go get your guns!

(to the KLANSMEN)

And burn all your crosses.

1ST KLANSMAN

Woah, stereotype.

ABOLITIONIST SPEAKER

Go after them! Off those two records alone...

(to himself)

I could be so rich... My family so well off. For, like, generations...

ANOTHER ABOLITIONIST

What's that? / Wait, how'd they have the record? Wasn't it in the...

ABOLITIONIST SPEAKER

Just—after them!

What do you mean how? They stole it.

He points to: upstage, the wheels on the tape recorder spin and spin—spooling a lonely strip stuck leftover, the rest of its length gone missing, ripped at the edge.

Now sufficiently convinced, the men scatter in all different directions looking for the missing tape—they do so slowly and with the respective attitudes of a child rightfully scolded.

Left alone and to his own devices, ABOLITIONIST SPEAKER walks over to his briefcase and opens it up to reveal a second, full, still-spinning tape recorder.

He hits the button that stops the recording and removes the roll of tape from the recorder. He holds it, facing out toward us; lights shine film-noir stark against his silhouette as he bursts into—

1ST ABOLITIONIST

HaHaHaHaHahahaHahahaHahah [etc.]

—a cartoonish evil laugh. Thunder strikes as The Isley Brothers' version of the song's chorus plays quietly, barely audible like waves against a distant shore, looping through the transition and into the following scene until otherwise stated...

<i>"I</i>	<i>keep</i>	<i>hearin'</i>	<i>footsteps</i>	<i>baby</i>
<i>In</i>	<i>the</i>	<i>dark,</i>	<i>(oh)</i>	<i>in the dark</i>
<i>Why'I</i>	<i>keep</i>	<i>hearin'</i>	<i>footsteps</i>	<i>baby</i>

In the dark, in the dark"

SCENE 20 – THE NORTH,
GOIN' NO. 1

The FUGITIVES convene around a common point centerstage.

QUATROON

You got it? You got the record?

LADY BLACK-MOON

Course I got the record. Cuntroon might be the brains, but bet she can't move her hands fast like me.

CUNTROON

We gon' be swimmin' in it, y'all. Free *and* famous.

TYROON

And rich.

CUNTROON

Oh, baby, of course rich. You know I wudn't forgettin' about no rich, honey. Now, let's uh...

LADY BLACK-MOON

What do we do?

QUATROON

Y'all know how to get a record sold?

CUNTROON

Shit, I forgot about that part.

LADY BLACK-MOON

Shh, y'all hear that?

TOP 40 RADIO DJ

Welcome back to HOT 97! With all the dopest runaway slave hymns.

(that obnoxious radio horn noise)

The American Anti-Slavery League has put out a bounty for any information leading to the capture of four runaway slaves going by the names of: Quatroon, Cuntroon, Tyroon, and Lady Black-Moon. And now that that's out of the way, here it is, the two-hander coming at you: Grave Sin & Footsteps in the Dark by The Fugees!

They're all aghast.

LADY BLACK-MOON

A bounty?

CUNTROON

Fuck a bounty! This motherfucker is selling our record!

QUATROON

What we gon' do?

LADY BLACK-MOON

... Keep runnin'.

A record-in-case flops down in front of them,
blocking their path. LADY BLACK-MOON
picks it up.

QUATROON

What's it say?

LADY BLACK-MOON

"Grave Sin" (Single by The Fugees. Featuring B-side Top 5 hit: "Footsteps in the Dark.")

QUATROON

What's it say in the blurbs? Wait, let me read it.

LADY BLACK-MOON hands the case to
QUATROON.

QUATROON

Songs so good made me feel like they had a friend in me. – Fia the Slave

LADY BLACK-MOON

Read the next one.

QUATROON

"The songs of a generation." "Enlightened and inspired." Oh, listen to this one: "Single-handedly started the Civil War and saved our Union" – Abraham Lincoln.

CUNTROON

Oh, that's nice. But, wait, Lincoln is dead, ain't he?

LINCOLN runs on from off, still bloodied from
the first shot endured,

LINCOLN

No! no no no no no no—

JOHN WILKES BOOTH enters from the wing
and plants himself, stretches his shooting arm out
and fires point blank—BANG!!!

JOHN WILKES BOOTH

Die, traitor.

LINCOLN falls to the ground, dead again.

JOHN WILKES BOOTH walks over and
crouches over LINCOLN's body.

JOHN WILKES BOOTH
Be your blood on Mary Todd's hands and be your Union broke-/-

He suddenly spots The Fugitives all looking at
him.

JOHN WILKES BOOTH
Whatch'all doin'?

QUATROON
Runnin'.

JOHN WILKES BOOTH
Shit, me too. I mean.
(beat, he looks over to Lincoln's body briefly)
I guess I'll see y'all 'round then.

JOHN WILKES BOOTH begins to exit.
CUNTROON
Hey.

JOHN WILKES BOOTH stops.
CUNTROON
Could you take him with you?

JOHN WILKES BOOTH
Oh, sh—uh, I. Yeah, sure, I, uh, yeah, I guess. Sure.

JOHN WILKES BOOTH slowly drags
LINCOLN's dead body off the stage.

The Fugitives watch as he does this, it takes a little
while. He carelessly drops the dead man a few
times, annoyed with himself every time he does,
on his way out...

BOUNTY HUNTER
There they go, I found them runaways!

QUATROON

Damn, already someone after us?

BOUNTY HUNTER swaggers in. One hand on his holstered gun, the other down the crotch of his pants.

BOUNTY HUNTER

Don't you all try to run nowhere, a'ight?

I'm a man from the manmade land of the American South, where we cut our teeth on the empty threats of boys playing men.

(he takes out a gun and cocks it, spits chewing tobacco)

Where I come from we settle both bouts and bets by duel. And, for your own safety, there are ten things you need to know:

(he does a pointe spin)

Number one—!

TYROON quick-draws and fires in one fell swoop like Walker, Washington Ranger.

BOUNTY HUNTER immediately falls to the ground, dead.

QUATROON

/ Jesus!

CUNTROON

/ Oh my God, Tyroon!

LADY BLACK-MOON

When did you get a gun?

TYROON

Guess I kinda took it from one of those dancing Klansmen

NICK enters.

NICK

Y'all called about selling a record?

They all make exasperated noises.

NICK

All those blurbs should be money in your and my pockets. Nick: playwright, agent, manager. I just want to work toward what's best for you.

CUNTROON

But you don't know us.

LADY BLACK-MOON

How would you know what's best for us?

QUATROON

Sidebar?

NICK flashes a losing smile.

They all walk off.

A "phone booth" is ushered on. NICK looks after The Fugitives, then crosses to the phone booth. He takes a loose scrap of paper from his pocket and dials a number.

CUNTROON (OFF)

What do we do with this fool?

NICK

North. Around—around where Booth killed Lincoln.

(he looks around)

I'm confiding in you on the condition that you come ready to talk compensation. Mine, of course. Oh and theirs too, I guess, depending on the amount. Bring hard numbers when you come.

CUNTROON (OFF)

Hey, Nick!

NICK

Yeah?

CUNTROON (OFF)

Come over here! A word...

NICK exits after The Fugees.

Lights down.

SCENE 21 – THE RUNAWAY TRAIL, WESTWARD BOUND

FIA and MASSA JOHN, on HORSEBACK,
walk onto a wild-grass plain in front of a

dilapidated country shack. They both look considerably fatigued.

MASSA JOHN

Stop. Stop. Stop.

He climbs down from HORSEBACK. To his knees almost immediately.

MASSA JOHN

Fuck, my insides are tearin' up.

FIA

/ It's hard being hungry when you not used to it.

MASSA JOHN

I need... I need...

Hey, you shut the fuck up! I'll hang you like we did your kin.

FIA

You can't even stand.

MASSA JOHN takes out his gun and fires, FIA starts. No bullets. They stay like this.

A man, PARKER, exits from the shack.

PARKER

Hey.

They freeze and turn to him.

PARKER

Y'all look pretty worse for wear. Why'nt y'all come in for dinner? It's none fancy, but it's what I eat myself.

MASSA JOHN hesitates.

PARKER

What? You don't trust me? Aright, hitch ya horse to that gate—least you're welcome to—and sleep tight together. It should be plenty cold out here tonight. Chewing tobacco?

He extends an open snuff container to MASSA JOHN who glares and doesn't take.

Beat.

PARKER withdraws his offer.

PARKER

Alright then.

PARKER starts to head back in.

MASSA JOHN

Wait.

PARKER

What's that?

MASSA JOHN

What's your name?

PARKER

My name's Parker... That make you feel better?

MASSA JOHN

We'll join you. / Long as we ain't no imposition.

PARKER

That's gracious of you. Imposition? No. My mamma was a real hostin' type. I guess I inherited her gift for it.

FIA

/ My grand-mammy held my mamma while she cut cane and my mamma me.

MASSA JOHN

Lemme go on and hitch this horse then.

MASSA JOHN exits with HORSEBACK and reenters loading bullets into his gun. He holsters it.

PARKER

Inheritance... Guess we got somethin' in common then, Fia. Y'all come on in.

PARKER leads with FIA behind him. MASSA JOHN scrutinizes both of them as they enter...

PARKER's place. Mostly a dining room table with three chairs on either side of it.

PARKER

That's the table over there. You all can sit where you please.

He brings over bowls and utensils.

FIA, fiddling with them, drops her utensils from the table—fork, knife, and spoon—and they clatter on the ground.

PARKER brings tea.

MASSA JOHN

Keep civil now, Fia.

FIA

Yes. Sorry.

PARKER brings over a pot.

FIA restores her utensils to the table—fork and spoon. She takes a drink of tea.

PARKER

Help yourselves.

No one eats.

MASSA JOHN

So how do you know Fia, Parker?

PARKER

What?

MASSA JOHN

Fia. How do you know her?

PARKER

I don't. / Not well.

MASSA JOHN

You seem to know her name 'fore I said it.

PARKER

Oh, uh...

FIA dangles her ear-tag and points, signaling to PARKER.

PARKER

Oh, her tag. I could read it on her tag.

MASSA JOHN

Mm. Okay. Wouldn't wanna mistake you for a conductor or something.

PARKER

Course not. / Ha-ha.

MASSA JOHN

Right then.

PARKER

You should eat. You welcome to stay the night, but I imagine you want to / get a early start in the mornin'.

MASSA JOHN

You like her, though?

PARKER

Huh? Fia? I guess I do.

MASSA JOHN

You could tell she work good, can't you? Worth a lot where I come from.

PARKER

Worth a lot a whole lotta places.

MASSA JOHN

You wanna buy'er?

Don't know that it make sense carryin' all that weight back with me to Hell County, 'specially since I only got the one horse, you know?

FIA and PARKER are both taken aback.

MASSA JOHN

So you wanna buy'er? C'mon, give me a price.

PARKER

I'm not a rich man, Mr...?

MASSA JOHN

John. But I didn't say give me a high price, all I say was give me a price.

PARKER

I don't know. \$100?

MASSA JOHN

Ouch.

PARKER

Like I said, I'm not / rich.

MASSA JOHN

—Not rich. I hear you. Mm, okay. Wow. Looks like we won't be eating after all, Fia. Clear the table, huh?

She does. Everything but her own tea.

MASSA JOHN

Look at her go.

Hey, you would wanna stay with him, Fia?

FIA

(avoiding eyes)

I'm happy to work wherever the work come to me.

MASSA JOHN

You hear that? That work ethic? For \$100? A steal. You got the hundred on you? In cash. I say you show it to me. It's a shame, sure, but my gut tell me to don't trust you.

PARKER pulls a roll of bills from his sock. He counts out \$100 and tosses it on the table.

FIA and PARKER look on at one another. While JOHN's looking at FIA, PARKER nods at her. While JOHN's looking at PARKER, FIA nods back.

MASSA JOHN

Ah, that's good ration money. But I'm sorry to say, Mr. Parker, Fia's gon' stay mine.

(he grabs the \$100 from the table and pockets it)

Forever. After I die, she be my son's and his son's after him. She too good to be free from my family. Wouldn't know what to do without me.

PARKER

How 'bout you let her loose to someone like me and watch her try?

MASSA JOHN

I rather let her loose to her own devices than let her loose to you.

PARKER

Shame when a kind don't trust a kind. Careful what you wish for.

MASSA JOHN

I take clean-care o' my property.

PARKER

Seem to me Fia might beg to differ.

MASSA JOHN

God, you really want her, huh? Might just break her to see how you jump. Careful I don't kill her. Kill her, I'm wont to kill a Union fighter next. You a Confederate man, Parker?

PARKER

Conscientious objector.

MASSA JOHN

Them is big words to say pussyfoot.

PARKER

I'd ask that you don't call me out my name.

FIA grabs her tea from the table.

MASSA JOHN

You right. You a man. A man name is his property. But this?

He grabs FIA.

MASSA JOHN

This here is my property.

He draws his pistol and aims at FIA.

MASSA JOHN

I got ownership rights.

He cocks the gun.

PARKER

While your property is your property, my house is my property and I beg you to not spill blood on my floors.

MASSA JOHN

That so? You got till three to convince me. Else your walls'll be painted bright red in half the time it takes you to blink.

One...

Two...

PARKER

Ah, fuck me.

FIA jerks her body, fuckin' with MASSA JOHN's aim on her.

PARKER snatches a rifle from beneath the dining table, and kicks the table over as he does;

MASSA JOHN re-aims his own firearm before PARKER can aim—

MASSA JOHN

Knew it, nigger-lover.

FIA throws the tea in MASSA JOHN's face.

MASSA JOHN

Agh! Goddammit!

MASSA JOHN fires blindly, hitting nothing. Then he reaches out trying to grab FIA.

MASSA JOHN

C'mon, Fia! Take my hand!

PARKER cocks his rifle. MASSA JOHN kicks it from his hand. It clatters, sliding across the floor

PARKER

You could go back to Hell County real peaceful-like Mr. John.

MASSA JOHN, rubs his face and trains his gun on PARKER, aiming square at his chest.

MASSA JOHN

I'm only goin' if I can take'er wit' me.

PARKER

If it's company you want, I been known to offer a good time for the right price myself.

MASSA JOHN

You soon as sell yourself like you got nigguh-skin, huh, Mr. Parker? Well, you don't. Any color in your complexion is dirt and I don't do deals with dirty men.

PARKER

At least dress me 'fore my mama see me at the wake.

MASSA JOHN

See you she might. Recognize you she won't.

MASSA JOHN raises his aim from PARKER's chest to his head.

MASSA JOHN

I'll carry your face with me. In my back pocket. Like a souvenir. She can have what's left.

MASSA JOHN cocks his gun.

He closes one eye as he aims and tightens his entire posture around the trigger of the gun...

FIA pulls a dinner knife from her garter, and stabs MASSA JOHN in his steady shoulder. He stumbles back from the shock of it, he shoves FIA hard.

PARKER takes the chance to dive for his rifle. From the ground beneath them, PARKER fires upward, hitting MASSA JOHN in the chest.

MASSA JOHN falls, just about dead on impact, hidden behind the dining table. He gurgles and sputters his last few breaths while FIA and PARKER look on, breathless to match.

...

PARKER works himself back to his feet. He gathers his bearings.

FIA takes a deep breath.

FIA

You got a bag?

PARKER points to the dining table.

She checks behind/beneath the fallen table. She pulls a cheap duffel bag from it.

She moves around the house, packing foods and other essential nonperishables.

PARKER

So...

FIA

So what? Is this how you normally get girls my color to go to bed with you?

PARKER

Beg your pardon?

FIA

Nothing. Just know I'm not one to lay that way. You look like you got a question weighing on you.

PARKER

You all usually got a story: wha's your story this time?

FIA

You know sumn: I rather change it than retell it.

PARKER

Yeah?

FIA

Yeah.

Beat.

PARKER

Cool.

FIA

Cool.

'Nother beat.

PARKER

But, uh. Heh. What's that mean?

FIA

I'ma go somewhere away from here. People try to go up and down, up and down all adjacent to the Atlantic; ain't no up and down when you could see the trade from where you living.

PARKER

Where you supposin' you'll go?

FIA

Somewhere west. Family to look for. Maybe make settlement with some Indians if I find 'em.

PARKER

It's some Indians what had more slaves than Johnny ever had.

FIA

S'that so? Guess that's a risk I rather run: the danger I don't know 'stead o' the one I do.

PARKER

Danger is danger, Fia-baby.

FIA

Hmph.

PARKER

All I say is: you ain't got to rush to run off somewhere. You see me ownin' no slaves? I'm a good white man. You safe here.

FIA

With all due respect, Mr. Parker, ain't no such thing as a good white man in the West.

She grabs her last souvenir: a heavy, weighty revolver, heretofore hidden. She palms the gun and slings her bag over her shoulder,

She crosses to a fireplace, pulls out QUATROON's letter from LUCY'N'LUDWIG and she tosses it into the fire.

With a slight, slightly polite nod to PARKER, she takes off out the front door,

brazen as she goes.

PARKER sits in this moment, alone, with John's dead body on the floor beneath him.

During this moment, stage magic—i.e. a lovely, dedicated stagehand team, godbless—pulls the furniture/set flourishes away until it's just the two men's bodies—one alive and one dead—in close proximity and the chair PARKER sits in.

Some seconds of silence.

Silence until we can't hear FIA's steps anymore.

PARKER stays silent until the quietness feels all too oppressive for his imagination and he grows restless,

PARKER

But. But this is the East, ain't it?

Lights down.

SCENE 22 – THE NORTH,
PAYBACK: A BERETTA FUNK OPERETTA

The Fugitives and NICK stand at odds with each other, mid-argument on one side of a conference table.

TYROON

You what?

He slaps NICK across the face. NICK grimaces.
Cries a little bit.

NICK

Okay. That almost hurt.

LADY BLACK-MOON

Why would you do something like that?

NICK

Do y'all wanna be free and broke? What good is that? This way, you get to Freedomland and have a little change in your pocket to keep you fed when you get there.

TYROON

Yeah. Yeah.

CUNTROON

Told y'all we couldn't trust this fool.

NICK

I'm just trying to help y'all.

LADY BLACK-MOON

No, you're trying to help yourself.

CUNTROON

Least let me do the talking when they get here.

LADY BLACK-MOON

I think I got a way with words the best.

QUATROON

I'm the only writer in the group, so if anyone's good with words.

NICK

(to QUATROON)

Okay, ow.

(to the group)

And for the record: I'm directing the conversation. I am the leader, I am the facilitator, I am the, the, the glue, do you understand me? I am your greatest ally and your greatest advocate—who would it be [otherwise]? Fuckin', fuckin', fuckin' Fia? These "pro-freedom" assholes? No, me.

(he gestures all around them)

Insofar as my success is the only thing that matters to me and my success is tied to your brand, your brand is the only thing that matters to me. I am the only man who can talk my way through this.

The ABOLITIONISTS enter. One in a BAILIFF
getup, another in a JUDGE getup.

JUDGE ABOLITIONIST

Well, well, well...

NICK

Gentlemen, if you'll be so kind as to take a seat.

JUDGE ABOLITIONIST

Kind of you to offer, but no thank you.

(he moves the table aside)

You see:

BAILIFF ABOLITIONIST

There's a warrant out for your arrest.

NICK

What? What are the charges?

BAILIFF ABOLITIONIST

Happy you asked: Trafficking in illicit goods and counterfeiting. Profiteering. Wage theft. Fraud. Bribery. Racketeering. Shall I go on?

NICK

Sure.

BAILIFF ABOLITIONIST

What, I—Negro, you selling slaves!

NICK

Technically, no.

BAILIFF ABOLITIONIST

You're mortgaging slave traumas.

NICK

A small but significant difference, no?

BAILIFF ABOLITIONIST

Wrists.

NICK extends his arms and the ABOLITIONIST
BAILIFF ushers NICK to a defendant's table.
Across from a prosecution table with two
ABOLITIONIST lawyers.

BAILIFF ABOLOTIONIST

All rise.

JUDGE ABOLITIONIST

Calling the case of the People versus Nigger-Nick. Are both sides ready?

NICK

Uh, the defense requests that their lawyer be present... And that they not be referred to as "Nigger-Nick."

QUATROON

Can I / do it, please? Could I?

NICK

No, no, no, fuckin' no, no

JUDGE ABOLITIONIST

The court recognizes Quatroon as acting attorney for the defense.

NICK rolls his eyes and throws up his hands.
Super drama queen about it.

NICK

Motherfuck, *fine* then.

JUDGE ABOLITIONIST

Opening statements.

ABOLITIONIST LAWYER

Nigger-Nick is born a free man only to jockey down to the South and disrupt our calm. I offer that not only is he guilty of the crimes he is presently being charged with but he is additionally guilty of inciting this insurrection of the Civil War in the first place. Had he not mobilized those four runaway slaves, never would they have recorded Grave Sin and Footsteps in the Dark, the by-now infamous rallying songs which ultimately moved the North to declare War against the Confederate South. If that weren't bad enough, he sought to profit from selling back the bodies of the very people he just freed—the people he incited a war for. It is conniving, it is greedy, and it is completely American.

A fellow ABOLITIONIST from his counsel
whispers in his ear.

ABOLITIONIST LAWYER

Excuse me, Your Honor, I'm being told it is completely *un-American*...
Thank you, Your Honor.

JUDGE ABOLITIONIST

Defense.

QUATROON

Thank you, Your Honor, my client—

JUDGE ABOLITIONIST

Motion denied.

The court recognizes neither Quatroon nor his client citizen enough to plead their case and in the absence of any legal defense, I have no choice but to find the defendant guilty for Trafficking in illicit goods and counterfeiting. Profiteering. Wage theft. Fraud. Bribery. Racketeering. And mortgaging slave traumas. I sentence you to execution by the state, to be pursued and performed as soon as resources permit.

JUDGE ABOLITIONIST bangs his gavel and
changes out of his robe.

NICK

Great. Great. Shit fuckin' job, Quatroon. Real Grade-A work.

LADY BLACK-MOON

Wow, they really judge, jury, and executioner out here.

QUATROON

Sorry, man, I really thought... 'Cause I been readin' and I been writin'.

NICK

There's more to lawyering than just reading and writing, you fuck!

The tables are pulled from the space and they all resume in an unkempt wooded clearing.

The ABOLITIONISTS usher NICK to the center of the space.

The bassline from the song Payback by James Brown begins somewhere beneath the space and it sounds/feels deep—accompanied by those infamous Godfather screeches—like it's rumbling somewhere in the ground beneath the stage. It's undecipherable for the first while, but becomes clearer and clearer/more prominent as the scene goes on...

JUDGE ABOLITIONIST

For the proceeding execution, the State of New Jersey grants these four fugitives temporary citizen status in order to carry out the execution on behalf of the New Jersey Supreme Court.

QUATROON

What?

JUDGE ABOLITIONIST

In other words, "Would you do the honors?"

CUNTROON steps forward from the rest of the four and takes the gun.

CUNTROON

I prayed they would let me get my hands on you. You shouldn't'a sold us out for chicken change, motherfucker. And even still, we here to something like save you. In ways that we can't even save ourselves. Ain't that the kicker?

JUDGE ABOLITIONIST

Let him free.

The ABOLITIONISTS de-cuff him.

NICK hesitates at first. Then he makes a break for it, running deep into the wing.

CUNTROON aims with one eye closed for accuracy... She FIRES! and hits immediately.

Sure of her accuracy, she turns and hands the gun back to JUDGE ABOLITIONIST and wipes her hands on her clothes.

The JUDGE ABOLITIONIST is “JUDGE” no more...

ABOLITIONIST

You done good... Now; less get on back. Less keep fightin’ for freedom. God help us.

CUNTROON

God is dead.

ABOLITIONIST

Yeah, well, you killed him.

CUNTROON

Welp, anyone worth killing is worth killing twice.

ABOLITIONIST

What’s that?

CUNTROON

I said anyone worth killing is worth killing twice.

ABOLITIONIST sighs.

ABOLITIONIST

Now why you got to go on and say that? F’I didn’t know no better, I would say that’s insurrectional language.

ABOLITIONIST begins loading the gun.

CUNTROON

Tyroon!

QUATROON covers his ears. CUNTROON ducks. TYROON pulls his handgun and fires on the gun-toting ABOLITIONIST.

Time freezes for everyone except for the now-shot ABOLITIONIST—who, rattled, slowly pulls red kerchiefs from the neckline of his shirt, signifying

his death; his “blood” spews and spews as he
stumbles backward into the wing.

Time resumes.

TYROON

What now?

CUNTROON

Move fast!

LADY BLACK-MOON pulls the gun from the
holster of the ABOLITIONIST nearest to her and
immediately shoots him in the head, chin-up
style.

QUATROON reacts, but only self-defensively—
LADY BLACK-MOON notices and takes it upon
herself to defend him, standing in front of him
and firing at will.

TYROON

That’s probably enough. Look like they’re retreating now.

CUNTROON

No.

TYROON

No?

CUNTROON

I want revenge.

*The next part loops through a certain sampling of the
Payback song, it comes, it seems from different
directions about the stage in a way that
farctures/fragments each recitative line.*

*Through it, white bodies in the cast dressed
indistinguishably half-assed grand jete and temps
leve across the stage—into and out of the wings—like
the Confederate and Union men before them, the
white men use red scarves to signal blood spilled.*

JAMES BROWN (/GOD - M I O)

I

w a n t

r e v e n g e

I want revenge
My patience ends on
revenge
My patience ends on revenge
I want revenge , *I want revenge*

This goes on so that the action abstracts itself and becomes less representative and more impressionistic. At which point...

To end the scene, all the white bodies come on stage and freeze in assorted, amateurish balletic poses. The resolving *Payback* violin riff oscillates between notes—escalating to an end—so that when it does end, the bodies collapse to the ground around the Fugitives, sufficiently killed.

Lights down.

Practical beat.

Lights back up.

QUATROON finds himself alone among the dead bodies around him.

QUATROON

Guys?

Each dead body has a black cloth covering its face save for one. He is THE LAST OF THE ABOLITIONISTS.

He coughs. QUATROON jumps.

QUATROON

Jesus, thought all y'all was dead.

He gestures for QUATROON to come over to him. QUATROON hesitates at first, but ultimately comes over and crouches down near him.

THE LAST OF THE ABOLITIONISTS

You... you still breathing plenty, you think you won but...

(*he clutches onto QUATROON*)

They gon' come for you, they are. And they gon' stay on you like black on Dartmouth Rice.
(he coughs)
 Jump, Jim Crow, jump.

Smash to black.

SCENE 24 – THE NORTH,
 DREAMS OF REPRIEVE

The Fugitives walk through The North. Now, for the first time, together and without immediate preoccupation, they look completely depleted.

Nearby, there's a souvenir shop. It sells stupid knick-knacks and trinkets—most of it pro-slavery/anti-abolition. Most prominently, it sells John Wilkes Booth masks.

LADY BLACK-MOON

Well, what do we do now?

They all look at CUNTROON.

QUATROON

What are we allowed to do? Can't go to a movie up here, can't eat in a restaurant up here, can't go bowling 'cause it's not invented yet.

LADY BLACK-MOON

Well, we gotta do something. It's patrolman out North from here and they stay out until the sun fall.

CUNTROON

Why y'all lookin' at me?

TYROON

You the big planner, ain't you?

CUNTROON

I got us this far, ain't that enough?

TYROON

Considering we still under jurisdiction of the former Fugitive Slave Act, I'ma venture a guess and say no.

LADY BLACK-MOON

Well, we basically free right? Just a couple more days walking and we be there: to Freedomland.

QUATROON

It be nice to do something to celebrate.

CUNTROON

Well, now y'all bet' not look at me, cause what I'm not here to do is plan no fun-filled field trip activities. I ain't nobody mama.

QUATROON

It's not at least one thing you always wanted to do?

CUNTROON

Well...

TYROON

Well what?

CUNTROON

I always wanted to go to Coney Island.

LADY BLACK-MOON

Coney Island?

CUNTROON

Yeah, Coney Island. You know, walk the board walk, ride the rides, enjoy the sun and the sunkissed people. Sounds nice, don't it?

Beat. It doesn't sound nice.

TYROON

Sure. We be happy to go on to Coney Island, right?

(egging on the other two)

'Specially after all you done for us.

TYROON and CUNTROON share a look.

QUATROON

/Yeah, yeah, I guess it could be fun.

LADY BLACK-MOON

Sure, of course, it actually sounds quite lovely.

CUNTROON

Good. According to that sign, we just about there.

QUATROON

Wait.

CUNTROON

What?

QUATROON

We can't be recognized. I been hearing our song playing since we crossed into New York.

CUNTROON

So? They don't know our faces.

QUATROON

No, but there got to be posters with our face on it and if they put two and two together, they'll think we're the ones who started the Civil War. They hate Lincoln up here.

TYROON

So what are you saying?

LADY BLACK-MOON

We need to disguise ourselves?

QUATROON

Exactly.

LADY BLACK-MOON

But with what?

They all look up at the SOUVENIR VENDOR.

Lights down.

The sounds of rollercoasters and amusement park shenanigans.

SCENE 25 – THE NORTH,
CONEY ISLAND-STILLWELL AVE.

A cheap, splintered wooden sign reads "Welcome to C O N E Y I S L A N D."

Carnival music plays underneath, to the melody of Kris Kross' *Jump*.

Nearby, two black-feathered pigeons rest in a tree branch brooding over the underdeveloped boardwalk landscape.

CROW is covered in hay that's settled in between his feathers. JIM is half-burned: one half of him is flesh-tone black, the other half is grill-charred black. They both wear lavish jackets—CROW wears two identical jackets, one on top of the other—and obnoxious gold jewelry.

CROW

SKUH-WAHHH!!!

JIM

SQWAAAAAAK!!!

CROW

Ayo, what up, Jim?

JIM

Man, ain't nun'—what it do, Crow?

CROW

Sheeit, playa: you know, tryna hold the hood down: they say waters run ruddy you ride out to Stillwell.

JIM

Still? Hell, I'm fixin to find me some grub. Might eat some souls if I got to.

CROW

Shit, you ain't never lied. Where they sellin' 'em at?

JIM

Here? It's like Starbucks'es: on every corner.

CROW

Man, you play too much; le'e dese folks alone.

JIM

You catch that breeze last night? Cold than a muhfucka, wudnt it?

CROW

Shit, I spent last night in a horse's asshole—got the hay fever and all; they really do eat all that damn hay. Just to keep warm.

JIM

Shit, I saw a grill and laid down to fry one half of my body; got hungry at noon, almost ate my own wing. Just to keep warm.

CROW

Shit, I killed my son and wrapped myself in his carcass and get this: the wife wanna take me to court now.

(he kisses his teeth)

Just to keep warm.

JIM

Which one? Al? Man, fuck Al. So, I'm saying: if iss this cold, we oughta fly down to Hell County, right? They gotta have heat down there.

CROW

All them black folk they be burning, I be surprised if they didn't have heat.

JIM

You. Ain't. Lyin'! If this country a furnace, black bodies the fuel, o-kay? Up here they be burnin' witches and that heat jus' ain't the same.

CROW

Now, explain me something, Jim.

JIM

Talk to me, Crow.

CROW

How they figure you burn if you *are* a witch? Right? 'Cause if I is a witch...

JIM

Uh huh?

CROW

Can't I just

(he snaps and side-steps)

Snap myself free?

JIM

Oh, shit, that's true... You know what I don't get?

CROW

What's that?

JIM

If I's a former slave—

CROW

Ooo, no, don't go there, Jim.

JIM

No, c'mon man, it's a hypothetical. Hear me out...

If I's a former slave or the kin of a former slave, how I spend my time *not* rioting against America?

CROW

When you say America, you mean...

JIM

—American white supremacy, yes, 'cause I been lurking since 1619, come an adult in 1865 and I'm minding my business flyin' in the skies and shit and I could see where they been stealing niggas and shipping niggas and selling niggas and buying niggas and trading niggas and beating niggas and burning niggas and raping niggas and killing niggas *and* denying Negroes and disenfranchising Negroes and calling Negroes niggas and hosing Negroes and dogging Negroes and bombing Negroes and blaming Negroes and spitting on Negroes and assassinating Negroes *and* gerrymandering around black people and depriving black people and silencing black people and poisoning black people and undervaluing black people and firing black people and not hiring black people and imprisoning black people and murdering black people and I'm tryna turn a blind eye. To all of it, I'm trying to turn a blind eye. I'm like, "Jim, don't mind that. It's not yo' business. Just eat-yo-worms, eat-yo-flies, eat-yo-maggots. Eat-yo-worms, eat-yo-flies, eat-yo-maggots" And, erks

(he pantomimes turning his head)

You know? But how much can a bird ignore? What about the smells? The whole damn triangle trade smell like death, the South smell like death, the North smell like death, Lincoln smell like death, Lee smell like death, that cotton smell like death, tobacco and sugar smell like death, the dresses they make out that cotton smell like death, the ones that manage to run free smell like death, the ones that don't smell like death, the abolitionists smell like death, the literature smell like death, the sky smell like death and not to mention the dead bodies, the dead bodies smell like... well daisies, actually. But everything else? Everything else smell like death.

CROW

(a sultry stage-whisper)

"Death, the new Eau de Toilette by Jim Crow."

JIM

Exactly.

Ay, Crow?

CROW

Yerrr.

JIM

What that boy doin' down there? Why he takin' his shoes off?

CROW

Jim, relax. He prolly just goin' to the beach. Wait... why he tyin' them together like that?

JIM

Is that—is he—what?

A pair of shoes, tied together by the laces, spins like a ghetto boomerang on the air and comes flying toward JIM and CROW. When they see the sneakers flying at them, they jump and run off flailing in terror.

JIM

("fuck-fuck-fuck-fuck")

/ SQWAK-SQWAK-SQWAK-SQWAK-SQWAK!!!!

CROW

("motherfucker-motherfucker-motherfucker-motherfucker")

SQWAH-SQWAH-SQWAH-SQWAH-SQWAH!!!!

...

The Fugitives enter below, all wearing their John Wilkes Booth masks.

LADY BLACK-MOON

You hear that?

QUATROON

What?

LADY BLACK-MOON

The birds here sing such lovely songs.

TYROON

Uh huh, sure, girl, I ain't hearin' all that. So what now? We done rode all the roller coasters.

Somewhere upstage, there's a "JOHN WILKES PHOTO BOOTH" – a placard nearby reads: "Take a picture with the white knight who felled an American tyrant!"

The line for this thing is MASSIVE.

Enter a NATIVE NYER.

NATIVE NYER

You should go take a picture in the John Wilkes Photo Booth! He's an out of work actor so he's scrambling to make money, but it makes for a *great* photo!

CUNTROON

Why'd you tell us that?

NATIVE NYER

I don't know. You seemed like pretty big fans.

QUATROON

That sounds like fun!

TYROON

Quatroon, no!

QUATROON

Why not?

TYROON

Did we or did we not watch Booth kill Lincoln?

QUATROON

We did. Twice even.

TYROON

Right. So don't you think he'd remember the witnesses to his double homicide?

QUATROON

Ohhhh.

Yeah, no Miss, I'm sorry but we can't.

NATIVE NYER

You can't? Who in New York doesn't wanna take a picture with Booth?

She snatches off two of their masks, aghast to find that they're black.

NATIVE NYER

(shaken)

And... and you two?

The other two remove their masks as well.

NATIVE NYER

This is a crime. This is identity fraud. John! John! / Come out here, blacks are impersonating you!!

LADY BLACK-MOON

No, miss, no. Please don't.

JOHN WILKES BOOTH exits from the booth,
gun in hand.

JOHN WILKES BOOTH

Y'all? I thought I said don't let me catch y'all in the North.

TYROON

You didn't actually.

JOHN WILKES BOOTH

I didn't?

TYROON

No, we saw you kill Lincoln and then you were like "see you around."

JOHN WILKES BOOTH

What group of runaways did I see that I said "Don't let me see you in the North"?

NATIVE NYER

John!

JOHN WILKES BOOTH

Right. It doesn't matter. You shoulda known. It's The North.

CUNTROON

Quick, y'all.

They pelt him and her with any number of
carnival trinkets and game prizes. Running as they
do.

They successfully get away.

JOHN WILKES BOOTH

Goddammit. Those are the slickest, slipperiest motherfuckers.

The sound of a massive unrest offstage.

NATIVE NYER

Well the town musta just seen them.

CUNTROON (OFF)

Quick, put your masks back on!

NATIVE NYER

What do you think of a couple runaways donning your face like so?

JOHN WILKES BOOTH

My own image used as an icon for the equality of the races?

NATIVE NYER

I mean, I guess, if you wanna get, like, super meta or whatever about it.

JOHN WILKES BOOTH

My face be damned.

JOHN WILKES BOOTH walks down-center.
He grand-stands loading and cocking his gun.
Then he shoots himself in the face, collapsing to
the ground.

NATIVE NYER sighs.

She grabs his corpse and drags it toward the Photo
Booth.

She calls to the waiting crowd.

NATIVE NYER

Which one'a you's wanted a funny face picture? Has John got the face for you.

Lights down.

SCENE 26 – THE NORTH/THE NORTH-NORTH, THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF NICK

The Fugitives enter stage right and come to a big
white house in the center of the space, it sits on
the border between The North and Freedomland.
Highway signs suspended from above signify this
like so:

Left (/Stage Right)

Welcome to:
America (The North)
“Concrete Jungle Where Dreams Are Made
of...”

Right (/Stage Left)

Welcome to:
~~Canada~~
Freedomland (The North-North)
“We boast the kindest kind of neoimperialism.”

There's an uprooted mailbox on the ground
outside the door.

QUATROON

Almost there finally.

LADY BLACK-MOON

Is that a mailbox?

The Fugitives cross to it. QUATROON picks it
up.

CUNTROON

What's it say?

QUATROON

Nick.

LADY BLACK-MOON

Y'all think this house belonged to that guy? This whole house?

TYROON

He couldn't keep this whole house hisself.

LADY BLACK-MOON

(peeking in the door)

Looks empty from out here. Maybe we could crash here for the night.

She sneaks in.

CUNTROON

Wait, Quatroon, what's that rattling inside the mailbox?

QUATROON

Huh?

CUNTROON

Inside the mailbox: what's that making that noise?

QUATROON digs through the mailbox to find:
loose Ferrero Rocher chocolates, a postcard of
Picasso's Guernica—but with the whites and
blacks inverted—and a gold-tipped fountain pen.

CUNTROON

Nothing?

QUATROON

There's something wrote on the pen. It says, "The ink just got all over me."

TYROON

So?

QUATROON shrugs.

LADY BLACK-MOON comes back out.

LADY BLACK-MOON

Y'all, it must got sound walls; when I tell you it's warm in there? Come on. We can sleep here then finish the cross in the morning.

CUNTROON

Look like it's ready to fall in on itself.

LADY BLACK-MOON

We just need it to hold up for one night. After that, we can watch it fall on right behind us. From a safe distance.

TYROON

What kinda distance you talkin' about?

LADY BLACK-MOON

I guess we'll see when we get there.

They all follow LADY BLACK-MOON off into the house.

Lights down.

SCENE 27 – THE NORTH-NORTH, THE LAST BALLAD OF QUATROON FREEMAN

They enter THE HOUSE OF NICK. It's eerily reminiscent of the house at Plantationland from the top of the show. Similarly scarce. Desk and chair in the same place. Identical, down to the inkwell...

They all look around the house. LADY BLACK-MOON picks up a stack of papers.

LADY BLACK-MOON

It's even earlier drafts of his card in here. It's a lot shorter.

She flips through to the back.

LADY BLACK-MOON

But in this one, all the main four players die at the end.

CUNTROON

Damn.

LADY BLACK-MOON

Killed by the state.

TYROON

I don't see why it's so bad. Death is inevitable, right?

LADY BLACK-MOON

Yeah, but some folks get to be patient about the inevitable.

CUNTROON

Well, I rather live than die, any day.

TYROON

Any day not in Hell County.

QUATROON all this while has been flipping
through books—right now he's on, say, *Uncle
Tom's Cabin*.

QUATROON

What if Hell County stretch further than we thought it did? I mean: Massas then
Abolitionists then a Civil War then a house falling in on itself, / y'all feel any freer than we
did all them mornings ago?

LADY BLACK-MOON

I'm gonna go for a walk.

TYROON

Alright, that's it. Too deep for my blood. I'm calling it a night and I'm turning in for seein'
dreams of tomorrow.

CUNTROON

I hear that. Any roof is a good roof for as tired as I am.

LADY BLACK-MOON exits.

TYROON

And to answer your question: Yes, Quatroon, I ain't got dogs on me or ropes on me or whips
on me or chains on me so, yes, I feel a little bit—just the slightest bit freer.

CUNTROON and TYROON lay down on the ground. Somewhere far, but not too far from the Writing Desk.

CUNTROON

Damn, this floor cold.

TYROON kisses his teeth and moves closer to CUNTROON, wrapping one arm around her.

CUNTROON kisses her teeth too. They're both fidgety, annoyed with each other.

QUATROON looks around. Active in the head. He decides he can't go to sleep and crosses to the writing desk.

He pulls a sheet of pulled paper and using his new pen, he writes for himself.

After a while...

QUATROON

Wha's... Y'all, what year is it?

CUNTROON

Negro: slavery, taxes, death—what year *isn't* it? I'm goin' the hell to sleep. Now, Shut. Up.

QUATROON

Well, goodnight to you too, damn, I'm just tryin' to get the date and shit.

QUATROON reads the letter he's written to himself, mumbling sounds as he reads. He gets to the end and doesn't know how to sign...

QUATROON

Love, Quatroon.
Dated
... Today.

He folds and seals the envelope.

The he remembers something.

QUATROON

Wait!

He reopens the envelope. He starts reading it again, mumbling as he reads.

TYROON

Quatroon, if you don't stop humina-humina whisperin' in my ear.

QUATROON

Okay!

He reseals the envelope one last time and puts it away.

He starts penning a new thing.

LADY BLACK-MOON reenters.

LADY BLACK-MOON

You can't sleep either?

QUATROON

'Fraid not.

LADY BLACK-MOON

They say if you can't sleep it's cause something weighing on your mind heavy that you gotta get free of.

QUATROON

Is that what you did? On your walk?

LADY BLACK-MOON

In a way. What you doin' up?

QUATROON

Trying to write. Why you think that speaker guy said I ain't had a slow jam in me? I could write a ballad if I tried at it.

She looks at the paper he's writing on.

LADY BLACK-MOON

"The Last Balled of Quatroon Freeman." I guess you can.

QUATROON

Can't I?

LADY BLACK-MOON

You know there's more than one kinda ballad, right?

QUATROON

There is?

LADY BLACK-MOON

Yeah, of course there is. A ballad can be considered like a kinda story poem. You think you could do that better than a song ballad?

QUATROON thinks about it.

LADY BLACK-MOON

I'm gonna try to go on and sleep. Hope you get some rest too. Tomorrow's the big day. Goodnight, Q.

QUATROON

Goodnight.

... a ballad poem ...

He starts scribbling on his page, by the time he begins reciting, he's abandoned the page and instead acts out the ballad.

QUATROON

"The Last Ballad of Quatroon Freeman:" ...

A revenge fantasy...

(HORSEBACK gallops in from off and QUATROON hops on as he recites)

I hop atop a pale-skinned steed and ride toward the South
 Au revoir to welcoming new places
 Before the sun, the Great White Way preserves itself in white
 The frozen rain and the wind can catch clutch of desire in three faces

(HORSEBACK gallops in place as sounds of a generic forest play over them, full with hooves hitting forest-floor)

I rattle wrought and straddle fears with dreams of deep revenge
 Pump past border one and border two, beneath the mountain, above the plain
 I shine the sister's sword I'm heir to

(QUATROON unsheathes a small blade and polishes it on his clothes)

With bitter all to lose, but prideful much to gain

(HORSEBACK decelerates; gradually, someone brings out that familiar deli door as they slow to a stop)

My treasures swelling, I'm torn in two—lust and lust again—as I pull up to the shop
 Seeing shapes, I'm but a walking shadow, a poor player; thought then to be heard no more

(he dismounts from HORSEBACK)

Yet here, I return, my passion pistol cock is up and flashing fire soon to follow
 'Twould cost a groaning to take off my edge, I'm of few thoughts toward the door

(he walks through the door and LUCY'N'LUDWIG enter, assuming the same positions about the shop as earlier, but remaining mute and maintaining guilty, goofy smiles)

On the other side, a Southern standoff; the gun of God pressed to a glass grin
 Words won't do, I find myself at the mercy of a rageful lust-induced aphasia plight

(he kills them as he describes in the following:)

I cut her throat above the registers and disembowel him in the back. Their
 Blood money stays blood money, I steal shit: a blood orange ate under cover of the night

(he grabs a blood orange, he whistles, HORSEBACK reenters, and he hops on—they starting riding in place immediately)

Vindicated, I'm back on Horseback
 Keen to leave behind and not become the dead
 My peaceful bliss and freedom North
 But I still hear the words they said

(stage magic, read: lovely crew, take the door away)

LUCY'N'LUDWIG

You wanted your freedom, did you?

we'll get our revenge.

Jump, Jim Crow,

Jump, Jim Crow,

Jump, Jim Crow,

Jump.

(they roll from the scene, The House Scene assumes its place—he's back home now.)

QUATROON

I go on to sleep,
 one last night a slave.

(he hops off HORSEBACK, who gallops into the wing)

(He lies down on the floor.)

Tomorrow hopes of reprieve: when we leave this colloquially constructed house of ill-conceit.

(he turns over; all The Fugitives shift and get comfortable in their positions. TYROON snores and CUNTROON gently slaps him.)

Lights down.

SCENE 28 – THE NORTH-NORTH,
PRE-LEASE/JUNETEENTH JUMP

A road sign reads “Welcome to Freedomland.” A ways behind it is the interior of a house. It resembles The House of Nick which resembles the place back at Plantationland. You get the point.

CUNTROON

We made it.

TYROON

We fuckin’ made it.

LADY BLACK-MOON

That’s it, y’all? We free?

QUATROON

We free.

They hug each other. Understated, Cuntroon and Tyroon kiss.

TYROON

Holy shit, we did it together. All of us.

LADY BLACK-MOOON

We wasn’t gonna do it any other way.

QUATROON

I knew y’all wasn’t really gonna leave me with Lucy’n’Ludwig.

LADY BLACK-MOON

Oh no, we were. Yeah, we really were... but we’re happy you found your way back.

CUNTROON

That's the place you pre-leased?

QUATROON

Yeah, this is it.

CUNTROON

Huh. It's really *right* over the border, ain't it?

QUATROON

What can I say, I wanted to be able to see my old home from my new one.

CUNTROON

That's a load of shit.

QUATROON

Okay, you got me: it's the only one they would give me.

CUNTROON

There it is.

TYROON

Y'all head in, me and Cuntroon gonna go on and find a market. Get some food and stuff. Be nice to eat something you don't have to kill first.

QUATROON and LADY BLACK-MOON
enter the house. CUNTROON and TYROON
walk offstage.

LADY BLACK-MOON

This is a real nice place to say you puttin' down roots.

QUATROON

Yeah, guess I got lucky.

LADY BLACK-MOON

We should christen it. All the four of us. Have a dinner or something.

QUATROON

We should! What should we have?

They think for a second.

QUATROON

/ You know, maybe let's just wait and see what—yeah, that's what I was thinking.

LADY BLACK-MOON

Well, might as well wait for them to get back from the market.

QUATROON

How long you think it'll take them?

CUNTROON and TYROON rush back in,
stumbling over and pushing each other.

TYROON

Y'all!

LADY BLACK-MOON

Not long.

CUNTROON

It's other free-people in the town!

LADY BLACK-MOON

What?

TYROON
(kisses his teeth)

I wanted to be the one to tell them.

CUNTROON

Sorry, baby.

LADY BLACK-MOON

So? Should we introduce ourselves?

CUNTROON

I invited them over. Said we was having a welcome to The North-North party. A Juneteenth party. A Juneteenth ball.

LADY BLACK-MOON

Oh, girl, you know I love me a ball, you have to let me host.

CUNTROON

I'll think about it...

LADY BLACK-MOON

Cuntroon!

CUNTROON

Oh, girl, I'm playin', you know you gon' host.

TYROON

What about me, baby?

CUNTROON

You? You better start figuring out some music.

Do y'all not understand that guests is comin' now-now? Sure, because of CPT, they probably won't get here for another 30 or so minutes, but I need y'all to get moving now. Do you or do you not wanna celebrate being free?

They all rush out to get ready for the party.

LADY BLACK-MOON, given pause, comes back in.

LADY BLACK-MOON

Hey, Quatroon?

QUATROON

Yeah?

LADY BLACK-MOON

Don't you wanna do anything for the party?

QUATROON

Nah, I'm not really a party person.

LADY BLACK-MOON

Why is that?

QUATROON

You know, they're, like, not fun for me, I guess.

LADY BLACK-MOON

Every party is different.

QUATROON

Not different enough.

LADY BLACK-MOON

Mkay. Well, you do whatever-it-is is gonna bring you calm, okay? You earned that much.

She exits to start getting ready.

QUATROON stays downstairs. Reading and annotating as he reads.

...

CUNTROON and TYROON reenter, dressed up.

Around him, CUNTROON sets up decorations.

CUNTROON

You go on and set up the music in that corner.

TYROON gets to setting up the DJ station.

LADY BLACK-MOON enters dressed to the nines as well.

CUNTROON

Look at you, girl!

LADY BLACK-MOON

Girl, I know! I stole it from Mistress Joanna and I been waitin' to wear it. Now y'all come on, we got a party to finish settin' up for.

LADY BLACK-MOON helps CUNTROON set up decorations about the house. TYROON continues trying to figure out how to work the DJ station.

CUNTROON

Tyroon, you got that okay?

TYROON

Uh, I think so. Just about.

A knock on the door.

CUNTROON

Good, 'cause they here.

CUNTROON moves to go open the door.
LADY BLACK-MOON stops her.

CUNTROON

Oh, you right. Go 'head madam hostess.

TYROON plays a record...

ICE CUBE (/GOD - M I C)

—Break 'em—

It's *It Was a Good Day* by Ice Cube. It sounds hauntingly familiar... Kinda like *Footsteps in the Dark*?

LADY BLACK-MOON opens the door very elegantly.

On the other side of the door, three freed persons of color that closely resemble what The Fugitives looked like before they changed: CUNTRY, TYRY, LADY BLACK'RY.

LADY BLACK-MOON

Welcome, how do you do? I'm Lady Black-Moon and this is our Juneteenth party.

CUNTRY

Well, thank you for havin' us. It's so nice to have other runaway friends.

CUNTROON

I know that's right. We happy we found you when we did.

TYROON

I didn't catch all your names.

TYRY

Yeah, if we gon' be right chummy, I wanna least know what to call you. I'm Tyry.

TYROON

Tyry? Cool, I'm Tyroon.

LADY BLACK'RY

What a charming name, I'm Lady Black'ry.

CUNTRY

Cuntry. Though I should be called mama the way I got to hold these grown folks' hands.

CUNTROON gives her a "Who you telling?" look. CUNTRY looks at TYRY and CUNTROON at TYROON.

CUNTROON

/ Mhm.

CUNTRY

Mhm.

TYROON

/ Why you lookin' at me like that for?

TYRY

Why you lookin' at me like that for?

CUNTROON

Cuntroon.

The Fellow Runaways notice QUATROON
being all antisocial in the corner.

LADY BLACK-MOON

That's Quatroon. He don't feel up to the partying.

CUNTROON

Didn't you all have another with y'all?

CUNTRY

Oh, you mean Quatry? He ain't feel like comin' out to the party. Just stayed at home and stewed. I don't know.

LADY BLACK'RY

Seemed like something was troubling him.

CUNTRY

That's one way to put it.

LADY BLACK'RY

Like something was haunting him even.

TYRY

Well, if he's not here. We gotta make the best of it still, right? There's always a next time.

That awkward party silence where no one knows
what to say.

The sample extends past the vocals, overpowering
the mix—maybe a few lyrics of *Footsteps* sneak in
and over the top.

LADY BLACK-MOON

Oh, well, this a ball, right? Ev'rybody, y'all put on y'all masks!

All of the free folk, take out masquerade-style
masks and use them to cover their faces.

White bodies of the cast—each differently masked: John Wilkes Booth, Abraham Lincoln, a Klan hood w/ no robe, Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, Superman, & Archie—climb from the space of the audience onto the stage, unseen and unheard by the black bodies.

The song switches to *Jump – Extended Dance Mix* by Kris Kross.

LADY BLACK'RY

Ooo, girl, this song could bring somebody back to life iss so good!

The whole party gets to dancing.

QUATROON looks up and over at the commotion, disturbed from his writing.

NICK sneaks in from the wing. He tiptoes so as to go unnoticed and slips into the audience.

The whole party goes bananas dancing.

QUATROON gets up from where he's sitting and scrutinizes the white dancers.

They turn their attention toward him. They start dancing around him.

The actors playing LUCY'N'LUDWIG lift their masks and rest them atop their heads—Lincoln and Booth.

QUATROON is tripped the fuck out.

LUCY'N'LUDWIG

How'd your romance story end, Quatroon?

You have to tell us.

You have to tell us.

You have to tell us.

You have to tell us.

You have to tell us.

You have to tell us.

You have to tell us.

You have to tell us.

QUATROON scrambles off, trying to get away.

LUCY'N'LUDWIG

(in a monstrously deep, gravelly voice)

Nigger, where you going? You have to tell us how your story end.

The White Dancers stampede after
QUATROON.

TYROON is in full 90s DJ mode now...

TYROON

If you happy to be
At this party with me
Ev'rybody on your toes and say, "Free!"

FREE FOLK

Free!

TYROON

If you ain't goin' back to slav'ry
On the count of three, say "Free!"
... 1-2-3,

FREE FOLK

Free!

TYROON

1-2-3,

FREE FOLK

Free!

TYROON

1-2-3,

FREE FOLK

Free!

TYROON

1-2-3,

Lights out. The music drops out for a simplistic piano ditty. *Jump Jim Crow*—allegedly—by Thomas Dartmouth Rice.

Spot up on centerstage. JIM CROW basks in the spot.

JIM CROW

Sorry to crash a party, but I feel y'all's needed a show. A real show. I could tell you been waitin' on me.

He clears his throat and takes a breath.

JIM CROW

(singing and dancing, shucking and jiving)

(he takes out framed pictures of QUATROON and FIA and kinda sorta serenades them with this verse...)

Bohwn on ole Plantationland
A long time ago
Where I first learn to dance about and jump Jim Crow
(tosses the pictures)

Wheel about and turn about
And do jis so
Eb'ry time I wheel about
I jump Jim Crow
(small piano medley)

(now he does the same, but with a framed photo of NICK)

Reared in Flatbush, Brooklyn
Headass, friend becomes a foe
Generations later, writing jumps Jim Crow
(tosses it)

To be real about and learn about
To feel so low
Eb'ry time I'm feelin' out,
I jump Jim Crow
(small piano medley)

Lights up full again. The piano has dropped out and Kris Kross' *Jump* comes back on. The Partygoers have JIM CROW surrounded.

CUNTROON

Oh, we fittin' to jump Jim Crow, all right.

Lights down.

A practical beat.

Lights up.

They're still circled in exactly the same way, but JIM CROW is no longer there.

CUNTRY

Get'im.

Unbeknownst to the people onstage, we see JIM CROW climb from the front of the stage and into the audience.

He tap dances around through the aisles and around the back of the playing space.

All six of the remaining partygoers beat up on the empty air, hurling and hollering insults as they go.

QUATROON sneaks into the audience with a quill pen and a ream of pulled paper.

Lights go down and back up again, down and back up again, and so on through the following:

LADY BLACK-MOON

Wait, I hear him behind me!

TYRY

Behind me now!

CUNTROON

Y'all come get him, he over this way.

Through this sequence, QUATROON and NICK are penning pages feverishly and handing them to people throughout the audience.

Lights up one last time.

CUNTROON and CUNTRY look out to the audience.

CUNTROON

Wait, y'all I see him.

The music stops. There's a loud silence save for the scribbling on pages and tap-dancing in the house...

TYRY/TYROON/LADY BLACK-MOON/LADY BLACK'RY

Where at?

CUNTRY

He in the audience.

CUNTROON

He in the air.

CUNTRY

He in the culture.

CUNTROON

He in the words.

CUNTRY

He in all the words.

CUNTROON

He around us.

LADY BLACK-MOON

And we ain't even know he was there.

CUNTRY

Or we pretended we didn't.

JIM CROW climbs back onto the stage. The Partygoers back up, giving him space.

JIM CROW

Hee-hee-hee! Y'all niggas sumn. Y'all niggas a whole fuckin' black-back hoot. I mean, damn I had me a good time!

CUNTRY

That man is the devil.

CUNTROON

That man is worse. That man is a ill-willed white man.

NICK and QUATROON climb back onto the stage.

JIM CROW

And you... Mister, mister Nick... You's got sumn fo' me?

All the bodies in the cast—white and black—
enter from the wings to watch this go down.

After a great pause, NICK hands him a copy of
PLANTATIONLAND or slaves/slavers/countrymen.

JIM CROW starts flipping through it, licking his
fingers as he turns the pages.

JIM CROW

What's this?

NICK

It's my card, sir. You see,

*(he looks up to the actors around him, out to the audience
briefly)*

a life is a kinda career and a career is a kinda life, right? So, uh, I hate to ask, but could—
could I maybe have my life after all?

JIM CROW looks up from the script, seemingly a
little insulted, weighing whether NICK can or
not.

QUATROON, CUNTROON, TYROON,
LADY BLACK-MOON, CUNTRY, TYRY,
LADY BLACK'RY, FIA, COLORED WAITER,
ZORA, KANE GOIN' WEST, JHERICURL-
DRIP RICK, OSTENSIBLY FREE BLACK
WOMAN, RUNAWAY SLAVE COSPLAYER,
JIM & CROW + all the white cast—

—watch with vague anxiety as JIM CROW
makes his judgement.

(We don't see his decision.)

Lights down.

END OF PLAY.

Fall the House

a revisionist adaptation

by

Nicholas Kaidoo

CHARACTERS

THE HOUSE¹

GHOST, black, a OG

NESSA, black, his wife

BISHOP, black, their son

ALEXUS, black, their daughter

THE FURIES

ALEC, black, the responsible middle fury

MEG, black, the newest, kindest fury

TISHA, black, the oldest, DGAF fury

THE NEIGHBORHOOD

“KARA” THE KEROSENE GIRL, black, a girl wandering (~13/14/15)

OLLIE, black, a boy lost (~13/14/15)

ZAIRE THE GOAT, black, deadass a goat

PIANO MAN, black, a psychic... he doesn't play piano

GANG BANGER / LEROY / APOLLO, black / black / black

SETTING

The Atreus Housing Project

TIME

Aughties Pre-2008

Note: People should talk as fast as possible wherever possible.

¹ NESSA doubles as a second character in ACT V; GHOST & BISHOP can be doubled



Marcy Houses, a housing project in Brooklyn, New York



A still from Marlon Riggs's Ethnic Notions (1986), pictured here: a sculpted minstrel trinket

“A wretched, piteous dove, in quest of food, dashed amid the winnowing-fans, its breast broken in
twain.”

-- Aeschylus, *Proteus*
the only extant line as translated by Herbert Weir Smyth
a satyr conclusion to *The Oresteia*

ACT I

“AGAMMEMNON”

or

/ ghost is king /

ACT I

From dark,

a cassette is opened, loaded, and played:

The start of the Second Movement of Florence Price's *Symphony No. 1 in E-minor (Largo, Maestoso)*

we sit here a moment, then,

The symphony stops—the cassette clicks off.

It's switched to another cassette: 90s NY 808s.

THE WHOLE HOOD

(call & response)

I got no presidents to represent me—
(Say word?)

I got no presidents to represent me—
(Say word?)

I got no presidents to represent me—
(Said what?)

I got no dead presidents to represent me.

Lights up – dusk or the dark part of twilight: right on the cusp of nighttime, – as lights rise, the music fades.

A sign hangs under a window AC unit—

WELCOME TO:

ATREUS HOUSING

—in bright orange letters on a blue background. It's near-illegible for water damage.

The project housing complex goes on and on forever upward.

There are three buildings: left, right, center. Between each there are dead-grassed footpaths that function as alleys.

Rusted cast iron fencing, brown bricks,
decrepitude all abound.

THE FURIES are centerstage.

THE FURIES

(ALEC, MEG, & TISHA)

Twice upon a time there was a boy who died,

Downstage of the Furies, OLLIE dances to music
we can't hear: he's cutting and kicking, working
to a sweat.

ALEC

In the middle of the project

MEG

The world outside his home would live happily ever after.

TISHA

Happily ever during.
The project is just a plot of land

MEG

Land they said came with a promise—

TISHA

And the promise came out looking like...
(re: the buildings)
these.

ALEC

Some raggedy muhthafuckas, ain't they?

TISHA

Ease up, heifer, you live here too.

ALEC

Yeah and I'm not judging them for the color of their bricks, but for the contents of their interiors.

MEG

Here she go, quoting what she been reading.

ALEC

All I'm saying is this don't look like no promised-land to me.

Footsteps from afar.

MEG

Procession.

ALEC

What, like, Procession-land?

MEG

No, girl:

(pointing)

procession coming from Greenwood.

TISHA

(under her breath)

Might as well be Procession-land, though.

ALEC

The cemetery? They finished already? Getting these funerals faster and faster, ain't they?

TISHA

Not to be rude, but if they doing sumn everyday, I'd hope they'd get faster at it.

MEG

And look at that: the boy who run still dancing.

TISHA

He don't hear the song yet.

MEG

He look happy, don't he?

ALEC

You let that look fool you if you want to. He be out here; he know too much to be happy.

OLLIE's still dancing, wearing himself out.

A song sung by a chorus of children gradually
fades in...

CHORUS OF KIDS (OFF)

I know (I know)

it's a long way down (way down)

to the bottom

of the river Jordan.

I can't catch my breath

but Nazareth: if God got us, then—

A gunshot tears through the crowd and through
their chorus.

Unseen to us, kids scream and scramble.

OLLIE stops dancing.

He notices what's happened before him and he
readies himself to run.

As he heads up one of the footpaths, he stumbles
into a crouched KARA.

She's looking up at something.

KARA

/ Ow!

OLLIE

Sorry.

KARA

You know, people would stop calling you the boy who run if you stopped running.

OLLIE

You giving people too much credit.

KARA

You giving yourself too little.

OLLIE

I don't—are you wearing earplugs? Did you not hear them shooting at a crowd of mourners?
Get inside somewhere.

KARA

I don't have no 'inside somewhere' to go to. Sit with me.

OLLIE

Kara!

KARA

When are they not shooting at a crowd of mourners?
That's all anybody is.
They're not even still shooting.

OLLIE

Kara...

KARA

We'll stay low...
Why do they sing anyway?

OLLIE

You do it when someone dies. Is killed.

KARA

Yeah, but why?

OLLIE

It's more people. If offsets... the burden of mourning, I guess. I don't know.

KARA

What happens when you sing and no one calls a response?

OLLIE

You stop singing.

CHORUS OF KIDS (OFF)

Hootie Hoo!
(Hootie Hoo!)

OLLIE

Oh God...

KARA

You still going inside?

Restless shifting from inside the project.

TISHA

Fucking feds...

From off, the stirrings of a melody sung. The more people that enter from the project, the louder it gets – a surrogate song in the stead of a police siren.

Enter all the actors of the company: GANG BANGER/LEROY, PIANO MAN,

OLLIE, KARA, and the FURIES stay where they are,

NESSA & ALEXUS enter last.

They're all either armed or death-glaring as lights begin to color the set, oscillating red and blue.

THE WHOLE HOOD

(*ALEC*): Cop cars blur in the vision like a cataract;
(*TISHA*): coloring the city and the skins—keep it pushing,
(*MEG*): what's a Chevy to a Cadillac?
(*TISHA*): a common to a king?
(*ALEC*): they gon' get what's comin': (*OLLIE + KARA*): be not heard, be not seen.
(*TISHA*): no comment unless they talkin' to the drum magazine.
(*ALEC*): get out the car and the fat man'll come toe-to-toe with the killionaire Batman:
(*MEG*): a vigilante anti-to-martyrdom.
(*ALL*): that's me. if we gon' die in the hood, we gon' die in it free!
(*TISHA*): bye 12, you ain't gotta try 12,
(*MEG*): you say I'm protected by the law, but we both know that that's a lie 12.
(*ALEC*): shy 12, when you watch me die 12,
(*TISHA*): shyder still when you watch the life as it drains from my eye 12.
(*MEG*): why 12, do you gotta ride 12, go back to the side of the city you reside 12.
(*ALEC*): at the end of the day: "all's well that ends well"?
(*MEG*): word?
(*TISHA*): your morals don't break: your justice, it bends well.

The siren song comes to an end. Lights return to normal.

Everyone retreats back into the project.

KARA

Come, I wanna show you something.

OLLIE

Me and the guys were gonna wait on Ghost to get back, but I have a little time.

KARA

Cool, perfect, it'll only take a minute.

KARA and OLLIE exit up a footpath.

TISHA stares at us.

ALEC

You see Nessa had her apron on?

MEG

She making that stew.

ALEC

But for what, you know? Like, still? You ain't gon' run outta folks to feed out here.

MEG

Somebody gotta feed the folk. One-time ain't gon' do it, suits ain't gon do it. Course it's gon' be Nessa.

ALEC

I'm saying, though, ain't she did enough? She been doing it since niggas got Iphigenia kill't. One daughter dead, the other daughter agoraphobic as fuck—If I was Nessa, I would change the locks just to see what she do. Her son is off God knows where, her man is off God knows where and she in there making some stew?

MEG

Leave her to do her stew. It give her something to do with her hands.

ALEC

I ain't said nothing about her hands. If we talkin' about hands, you know who hands I'm worried about? That lil homeless girl. Why her hands smell like kerosene gas all the fucking time?

TISHA

(sees us)

Uh... who is they?

MEG

The cop car?

TISHA

No, heaux!

*(kisses her teeth;
cuts a side-eye at MEG)*

Say some dumb shit like that to me again...

I'm talking 'bout behind the cop car. On the other side.

ALEC and MEG see us now too.

ALEC

Who *is* they? Meg, what I told you about inviting your friends to the hood?

MEG

Them ain't no friends of mine. I got two friends and y'all here.

TISHA

Damn, girl, you need to expand your circle.

MEG

Heifer, how? You tell me that. How? What other magic fucking furies you know walking around the hood conjuring fire and shit?

TISHA

Ok, first of all, you need to stop hollering in my face before I give you something to holler about.

MEG

Try me. Them fucking caterpillars on your forehead'll finally get a trimming courtesy of
(her fists)
one – and – two.

TISHA

One and who? Meg, stop playing before I knock your lacefront so far back, you'll finally have some hair reach your shoulders.

MEG

You better keep your beefy, USDA-prime-looking ass away from me 'fore I make smoked steak on this stoop.

TISHA

(squaring up)

Before you make what? Girl, c'mon then, I ain't the one.

MEG

Alec: come get ya girl 'fore I fade her shit.

ALEC

(to the audience)

That sign say Atreus...

MEG and TISHA are confused.

MEG

What? Thank you, Alec, I can read.

TISHA

Who the fuck is you talkin' to?

ALEC

I was talking to *them*.

TISHA

Nigga, for what? Ain't nobody bothering with them.

ALEC

Yeah, but if they just watching us, it's like pornographic. If they listening to us, it's like a conversation.

MEG

No.
I mean, hardly,
they can't really, like, say nothing back... to... us... Ohhh.

TISHA

Oh, so they have to listen?

ALEC

The price of a ticket says yes.

MEG

I mean, unless they was comping a lot of them muhfuckas...

ALEC

Girl, don't say that! Tisha, knock on wood!

TISHA

Meg!! Why would you say that? You must got the Devil in you today.

ALEC

So, is y'all gon' talk, or?

MEG

Aight, fine, go 'head. Be quick wit' it.

THE FURIES

(*ALEC*): That sign say Atreus

(*TISHA*): We say we not who all you say we is

(*ALEC*): this era hell, parallel to the world you live in

(*MEG*): Round and round we go, like a cycle or a carousel

(*TISHA*): Killers out here don't share secrets, but their secrets share a tell

(*ALEC*): 24 hours in a day, or a shoddy pair of 12s

(*TISHA*): That's the gauges, my rage is swelling to fill stages

(*ALEC*): Bad-luck bucks, Bermuda triangle offense

(*MEG*): That would make Ghost the Mike to Phil's pages

(*TISHA*): Or Phil and Kobe?

(*ALEC*): Obi-Wan?

(*MEG*): Don to the cages.

(*TISHA*): Try to curry favor, but curry don't mean courageous.

(*ALEC*): Innocence, in a sense, costs overdue wages.

(*MEG*): You need to reinvest in the state of your state.

(TISHA): Y'all showing up to the Bank of America too late.

(ALEC): What is fate but fragile? Nothing.

(MEG): What is hate but wilted wishes?

(TISHA): What's the weight of a conscience dead?

(MEG): Left instead to build your riches.

(ALEC): Weighing petrie dishes

(TISHA): Dishin' dope and dopin' scratches itches

(MEG): Open batches switches

(TISHA): Fillin' ditches with yo' family if yo' family ever snitches

(ALEC): So your God is good, but what is God in the land where lawful good is evil?

(ALL): Which is which is which is which is which is which is which is which?

A slight, faraway noise from above.

MEG looks up at the sky.

MEG

Shit, y'all, hol'up: is it me or is that star getting closer?

ALEC

What?

MEG

I said, "is it me or is that star getting closer?"

ALEC

It's you, girl, you need to stop smoking all that damn reefer. / You don't know what they be putting in it nowadays.

MEG

I don't even smoke no more, you know that Alec! Y'all ain't even look!

TISHA

You the one talking about stars getting bigger. I don't know why you looking at stars anyway. Them things is all dead, Meg. Can't nothing dead come for you once it's dead. You know why? Because—say it with me—it's D-E-A-D, / dead. That's right.

MEG

(begrudgingly)

Dead.

ALEC

And we should know, we deliver half the niggas in the hood when they pass on.

TISHA

Sumn like bad body banshees, ayyy.

ZAIRE THE GOAT

Baaa.

TISHA

Heifer, did you just “Baa” at me?

MEG

Nah, that was him.

TISHA

Who is him?

TISHA turns and notices the goat.

TISHA

Whose motherfucking goat is that?

ALEC

Oh, here come Ray Charles.

A man enters in thick sunglasses just behind the goat.

PIANO MAN

My name is not Ray Charles.

ALEC

Ok, Stevie Wonder, then. What you want Piano Man?

PIANO MAN

My name is not Piano Man!

ALEC

What do you want?! Coming in here looking like a Blues Brother done stuck up Old McDonald—a damn goat in the projects—what do you want?

PIANO MAN

I just come to tell y’all what I hear.

TISHA

As opposed to what you see?

PIANO MAN

Oh wow, actually Tisha, I see a whole lot on account of *I’m a fuckin’ psychic!* So you lookin’ real dumb right now, ain’t you? That’s ableist, that’s real ableist of you, Tisha. Talkin’ ‘bout I can’t see. I bet you can’t see your baby daddy—oh, did the feds come *clink-clink* on Roger? Roger ain’t gon’ never meet his kids ‘cause of a mandatory minimum?

(mocking)

Or, was I not supposed to go there?

TISHA

Ok, but you ain't never gon' *see* yours, so...

PIANO MAN

Except I saw them before they was even born, Tisha, I saw them! I'm a fuckin' psychic, you not understandin' me! I'm coming to—

ALEC

What do you want?

PIANO MAN

So is y'all gon' let me talk or we gon' keep interrupting the nigga that could see the fucking future?

MEG

Fine, nigga, what do you see?

PIANO MAN

*(letting go of the leash;
crosses his arms)*

Well, I don't know if I wanna talk about it now. I've been treated so damn rudely here today.

TISHA

Keep playing, see if I don't snatch your eyes from out your head.

PIANO MAN

Ho, you ever seen Daredevil? I'm the hood version. I'll kick you in your fuckin' throat and then I'll... fly away?... with my wings?... or my webs or my?...
ok, I've never seen Daredevil.

Unbeknownst to PIANO MAN, the goat saunters
offstage.

ALEC

Nigga, ain't nobody asked if you seen Daredevil, we asked what you *did* see.

PIANO MAN

Fine. Suffice to say, bodies gon' wash up on this stoop, the whole project at the mercy of the sins of the father; and I just hope, I hope to motherfucking god, y'all get caught in the crossfire. Glory, glory, glory! I ain't in the habit of wishin' Death to no one, but I wish Death:—

(to ALEC)
to one,

(to MEG)
to two,

&

(to TISHA)
to three,

—but you know who not gon’ end up dead on this stoop? The head nigga in charge widda goat, haha you guessed right, it’s me!

Now, uh...

(clears his throat)

Um... fuck, I hate this part.

They watch him be disoriented for a little bit.

MEG

What are you looking for?

He sighs big.

PIANO MAN

Y’all seen a goat?

TISHA

A goat? In the projects?

MEG

Why, I ain’t never seen no goat in my life. Let alone—

PIANO MAN

I know y’all seen him, just tell me where my fuckin’ goat went!

(sucks his teeth)

Man, fuck y’all, I’ll find Zaire my damn self.

ALEC

Zaire?

MEG

What you got a goat for anyway?

PIANO MAN

It’s a metaphor, right? ‘Cause everyone knows I’m the head nigga in charge here.

MEG

Counterpoint: I think that no one knows that.

PIANO MAN

You got one more time. One more time to interrupt me. See what I do...

Anyway, since I'm the head nigga in charge *and* I'm the only nigga widda goat, the goat represent the order we keep in the hood. The hierarchy, the status. The way we keep order in the hood—

TISHA

You said that already.

PIANO MAN bristles at this really dramatically.

PIANO MAN

You know what? I'ma leave. Before I do sumn I regret.

TISHA

Hope you find your seeing eye goat, Ray Charles.

PIANO MAN exits, calling after ZAIRE.

KARA and OLLIE reenter.

KARA

I could've sworn I seen a goat back there...

OLLIE

I mean, what would a goat be doing in the hood?

MEG

To keep order.

ALEC and TISHA elbow her to be quiet.

KARA

I just thought it was weird, I wanted to show you.

OLLIE

If it was out here, it'll probably come back 'round.

KARA

Yeah, I guess so.

OLLIE

So I'm gonna...

KARA

Yeah, go on. I don't want you to miss your... waiting.

OLLIE

Later, Kara.

KARA

Bye, Ollie.

TISHA

That girl too damn young to be that damn thirsty.

ALEC

And who hand she gon' hold with kerosene gas coming out her pores?

TISHA

Wouldn't be mine, I know that.

MEG

Y'all leave her. She trying her best.

TISHA

Yeah, but sometimes a person best is not good enough. Matter fact, sometimes a person best is downright bad.

MEG

Hey, little girl?

TISHA

Why the fuck...?

MEG crosses to KARA.

MEG

Let me see your hands.

KARA shows them to her.

MEG

You see where they're cracked like that under the nails?

KARA nods.

MEG

That means you need to moisturize them.

KARA

But they always have this... stuff coming out of them.

MEG

That's alright we'll just put a little more on.

MEG takes out a travel size cocoa butter.

TISHA

I know you not finna waste your Palmer's on this homeless-ass-kerosene-gas-dripping-ass girl.

MEG

Girl, shutup. This is Palmer's cocoa butter.

MEG rubs the cocoa butter in for KARA.

KARA

Thank you.

MEG

This ain't nothing... What's your name?

KARA

Kara.

MEG

That's a nice name.

KARA

What's yours?

MEG

Mine? I'm Meg.

KARA gives her a hug that she doesn't know how to reciprocate.

KARA

Thank you, Meg.

MEG

Girl, stop—

ALEC

—Meg, stop—

MEG

You don't gotta keep thanking me.

MEG crouches down and holds her hands out.

MEG

Let me feel.

KARA puts her hands in MEG's.

MEG

There you go. Just a little bit softer.

TISHA

This bish playing pattycake with Rosemary's Baby.

ALEC

Hey, Meg, Leroy and them right round the way. Might be coming on over here.

MEG

(to KARA)

You don't need to be around no men like that. Go on around the back, alright?

KARA nods and goes.

THE FURIES

(ALEC): Look at her: little girl blue.

(TISHA): How the hood limit her chances outside the perimeter?

(ALEC): Easy – we don't give her home,

(MEG): She's out on her own.

(ALEC): Look at the way her flesh hugs to her bone.

(TISHA): Baby gotta eat! Goddamn, imagine it:

(MEG): Going to bed hungry having ate hope for dinner

(ALEC): Cooking up leaves in the summer and cooking up snow in the winter

(TISHA): Whoever you know as a sinner, I know as a saint

(ALEC): I notice the paint, deigning the red on the steps

(MEG): They left alive, they still painin'; their sister left dead on the steps

(TISHA): Iphigenia, messiah, the rock

(ALEC): Her daddy a Ghost and the king of the block

(MEG): He coming back or they say that he is

(TISHA): He can't go on in the way that he is

(ALEC): Nessa been stewing and stewing a soup

(MEG): All of the good that she do for the stoop

(TISHA): All of the good that she do for the hood—

LEROY (OFF)

—This nigga Leroy done got his hit wass good?

ALEC

Fuck...

TISHA

It's getting near Henny hour, girl, er'ryone wanna have a good time for the weekend.

LEROY stumbles in, clearly high off his shit.

He tries, and mostly fails, to dance his way in.

LEROY

I said Leroy to the house, I said Leroy to the house
oo-ah-oo, showing out!

LEROY

Good evening, Tisha and Tisha friends.

You looking mighty fine, Tisha, or as I like to call you: “Too *Ass*, Too Furious”—I take the
F out the “Fass” cuz I’m tryna make a pass.

MEG

Boy, if you don’t take your raggedy ass and your tired lines somewhere else.

LEROY

You ever seen ears on a croc?

MEG

No, Leroy, I never seen ears on a crocodile.

LEROY

That’s right, so since I’m wearing my gators, I can’t hear the haters.

ALEC

Leroy, you’re barefoot.

LEROY

Where’d my G-D gators go? Those boys walking without feets in ‘em.

MEG

G-D?

LEROY

Yeah, G-D: Golce and Dabbana.

TISHA

Leroy, get outta here before Nessa see you like this.

LEROY

I ain’t scared of no Nessa. What’s Nessa to a mac, a master dresser? A Teflon don as smooth
as he is tough? Girl, I’ll hit these notes for you cuz I’m a music buff: oo – oo – oo

*(he’s remarkably tone-deaf and does
a hip gyrating dance to match)*

Get closer

to my burning love (unh unh unh)
just love me
till you don't know how
ooo
keep going,
when the pulse don't stop, don't stop till you get enough;
keep going,
when the pulse don't stop, don't stop till you get enough;
keep going,
when Leroy don't stop, don't stop till you get enough;
keep going,
when Leroy don't stop, don't stop till you get enough!

A noise from just inside the project.

MEG

Shit, she's coming. Go on, Leroy, ain't nobody bothering with you.

LEROY

I ain't goin' nowhere 'till Tisha the fury do right by me: agree to be my pride and my prejudiced jury.

TISHA

Leroy, if you don't get the fuck away! In the court of Tisha, I eat motherfuckers like you.

LEROY

Oh, now you just talking my language, girl.

NESSA exits the project with a huge stainless-steel
pot of stew. It's distressed: she's used it a ton.

NESSA

Oh, Leroy, I'm glad you out here.

LEROY

Nessa.

NESSA

I know you high, but I told your auntie I would make sure you ate something. Come on and get this stew.

LEROY

Nawh, I don't want no stew.

NESSA

It ain't no choice, Leroy, come here.

NESSA fixes him a paper bowl of stew and holds it out for him.

LEROY

I said I ain't want no stew, ho, you deaf? You cain't hear me? Hello? Hello? Sound like 'hell no', 'hell no.'

NESSA

Leroy, not today. These niggas is been messing with me and I'm on my last fuckin' / nerve

LEROY

Wah, wah, wah, wah, I don't give a fuck. I said no and your dumbass not hearing me.

NESSA

Stop worrying yourself with Tisha, she ain't gon' give your sorry ass the time of day. Come here and—

He slaps the bowl of stew into NESSA's face.

LEROY

I said no! Didn't I say no? Get out my face before I snuff the shit out of you. I swear you ho's doesn't be hearing nowadays, but I'm not the one, you understand me? I'll kill Ghost, I'll kill you and y'all 'll both be laying there buried next to your dead fucking daughter. All three of y'all's worth the same amount of not-shit.

LEORY spits at NESSA's feet.

LEROY

Ight, then, I thought so.

(to NESSA)

Be gone.

(to TISHA)

Tisha, baby, I'll call you.

LEROY exits.

MEG

... you... you ain't got a phone...

... ok...

ALEC

Nessa, that's not Leroy. That's that stuff he on.

NESSA nods to herself. Goes back into the project.

ALEC shrugs, grabs the pot, and carries it in after NESSA.

NESSA reenters wearing a wide brimmed church hat pulled low over her face.

There's something bulging from under her shirt.

She storms right past MEG and TISHA.

TISHA

She going back over there by Leroy.

MEG

I could see that. What I wanna know is why she wearing that damn church hat?

TISHA

Fuck the hat, what's that sticking out her shirt like that?

MEG

She don't notice it's—oh no, she pulling it...

LEROY

You back? Girl, get out my face before I—

A gunshot.

Blood *SPLATTERS* all over MEG and TISHA.

TISHA gags.

TISHA

Oh my God, it got in my mouth, it got in my mouth!

(dry heaving:)

Hwurgh...

(tries to breathe through it, fails:)

—hwurgh!

MEG

Oh my God, Tisha, you got crack blood in your mouth! That's crack blood!

TISHA

I don't know if I should mouthwash or detox, girl—hwurgh—oh my god! I don't wanna be a statistic!

MEG

What-do-I-do?-what-do-I-do?

TISHA

Get a Epi-Pen! Get a adrenaline shot!

MEG

I don't know where to—

MEG looks around and picks up a nearby syringe.

MEG

What about this? You think this is an adrenaline shot?

TISHA

Don't give me no fuckin' needle from off the ground! / Are you dumb?

MEG

Well, shit, I don't know where to get no adrenaline at.

You know what, though?

TISHA

What?

MEG

(mocking LEROY's song)

I guess the pulse did stop, did stop 'cause we had enough,
keep going,

Guess the pulse did stop, unh did stop 'cause we had enough,
keep go—

(sees NESSA approaching)

—Ohshit, she coming this way. Act normal; if I get offed by church hat Charles Manson
I'ma come back and kill yo' ass.

They posture up, just in time for a blood-
splattered NESSA to enter.

TISHA tries to hide her gagging throughout the
conversation and MEG pretends to be mid-story.

MEG

So anyway, then Letitia had the nerve to tell me she ain't even know I had the dress like: ??
Heifer, you watched me buy it out the Rainbow. I paid half in credit card, half in coins.

Oh my God, Nessa? What you doing out here?

TISHA

We ain't even notice you was out here.

MEG

Yeah, we thought you was still in the house.

TISHA

Seen you go in, never seen you come out.

MEG

Never. Never. Never.

TISHA

(re: blood on her cheek)

You got a lil' sumn...

MEG pulls her arm back.

TISHA

You'll... you'll get it when you go in the house.

NESSA looks at the security camera.

MEG

What you lookin'—? Oh...

They see the camera too. All three look back and forth between each other and the camera.

TISHA grabs a nearby baseball bat and smashes the camera down. She beats the shit out of the camera.

TISHA

I was tired of that thang. Always catching me with my Paul Malls. LeVon talkin' 'bout, "I know you been smoking, Tisha, I work the security." Yeah, well, nigga, let that camera come out your check then since you work the security.

MEG

Yeah, fuck that camera. Now that camera done seen you as much as we have and we...

They turn their heads away so that they're no longer looking at her.

NESSA goes back inside.

Beat.

MEG
She gone yet?

TISHA
I don't know. I'm afraid to look.

MEG
Alright, we'll look on three.

TISHA
One... Two...

MEG
Wait! Wait!

TISHA
What?

MEG
I need a second to steel myself.

Beat.

MEG
Okay, I'm ready.

TISHA
Three.

They look up and see her gone. They relieved as hell.

TISHA
Oh my God, girl, I thought I was gon' die.

MEG
Shit, me too. You ever look the Devil in her eyes?

TISHA
How could I? No liner, no mascara, no moisturizer. Like, bish, take care of yourself, damn.

MEG
Lucky she ain't come for me, cause I woulda—
(*makes sure NESSA's out of earshot*)
—I woulda had somethin' for her if she did that.

TISHA

You wouldn'ta did nothing.

MEG

Wouldn'ta did—

(sucks her teeth)

I woulda let that thang sang, girl

(miming a machine gun)

Grrrrrat-gat-gat-gat-gat-gat-gat, you know what I'm sayin'?

An upstairs window opens with a thud. MEG
flinches hard as hell.

MEG

O shit!

It's ALEC.

TISHA

That thang sang, huh?

MEG

Shut up.

ALEC

What y'all talm about?

MEG

Nothing. Is Nessa okay? I just wanna make sure she okay.

ALEC

She fine for now.

A chorus of jeers from somewhere off. A faint
gang call.

ALEC

Shit, she won't be for long.

ALEC closes the window.

MEG

Why she talkin' in code like that?

TISHA

Shawty read The Color Purple one time...

MEG

What you think that noise was?

Super bassy hip-hop plays from somewhere far
but not that far.

TISHA

Think we got us a homecoming of a sort.

ALEC comes out.

TISHA

How she is, then?

ALEC

Her hair a mess. Like so bad. I see why she wore that damn hat. I was trying to comb it while she wasn't looking, but she wasn't having it.

TISHA

I meant how she doing with the news.

MEG

We don't know for sure that he's back.

TISHA

Don't be thick. He's back.

KARA enters.

KARA

Hey, Meg?

MEG

Y'all gimme a minute?

MEG crosses to KARA.

ALEC

"Meg"? How the bish know her name?

TISHA

Alec.

ALEC

Don't tell me Meg forreal made friends with the Salem witch.

TISHA

Girl, don't even get me started.

MEG

What's up?

KARA

Have you seen Ollie?

MEG

Nah, I ain't seen him.

Kara? Is Ollie your only friend?

KARA

(ignoring the question)

He said some of them were going to wait on Ghost.

MEG

Well, it seem like that bum nigga finally come home so Ollie oughta be back soon.

ALEC

Meg!

(sotto)

You talkin' to her?

TISHA reacts: that's what I was trying to say.

MEG

(sotto back)

Yes!

TISHA

Well, we finna run to the store. I need some Paul Malls. Is you coming or?

ALEC

I thought LeVon—

TISHA

Girl, LeVon don't tell me what to do.

ALEC

The Powerball like 2 point sumn mill now.

MEG

Shit, I could use two mil. I could get the human hair...

Okay, Kara: I'ma run boo, but I bet you he be back soon, okay?

KARA nods.

MEG

Good. Stay...uh... stay outta trouble or sumn.

MEG heads off with the other FURIES.

OLLIE enters.

KARA

Oh.

OLLIE

What?

KARA

Nothing. I thought you were waiting for Ghost to come back.

OLLIE

He's back. No more waiting.

KARA

Did you talk to him?

OLLIE

Ha, no. He just drove by. Like a President down Pennsylvania.

KARA

I don't think I know any presidential parades but one.

Music and cheers from off.

KARA

How come you're here? It sounds like they're celebrating.

OLLIE

They are. I'm not tall enough...

KARA chuckles.

OLLIE

Nah, they... hm... they can get a little crazy when they celebrating something.

Distant gunshots.

OLLIE

I learned that if things seem happy around here, just look the other way and,

He makes the noise of a truck horn and acts like
he's been hit.

He sits on the stoop when he's done his theatrics.

KARA sits next to him.

OLLIE

If I die happy, I want them to write "He knew it was too good to be true," in the little paper they give out at the wake.

KARA

I'll be the first one there. I'll proofread it.

OLLIE

Thank you. Was gonna ask you, just didn't know how.

KARA

I'll write it in all of them, if they forget to print it.

OLLIE

Eulogize me if you forget to write it.

KARA

Course.

OLLIE

Ha. You're really doing God's work.

A mix of music and deep-voiced commotion.

OLLIE

You hear that?

KARA

What's that?

OLLIE

The sound of the night here.

KARA

I don't hear it.

OLLIE

It's, like, a rhythm to it. Like a four-count.

Noise gets louder.

KARA

I think I hear it.

OLLIE

One-two-three-four. One-two-three-four. One—

KARA

two

OLLIE

-three-

KARA

four.

OLLIE

You hear them now?

KARA

I hear them now.

KARA grabs OLLIE's hand.

OLLIE

There's a music to the mayhem. You can keep time to people dying.

KARA

Can't believe I ain't hear it 'till now.

OLLIE

I was born here. I been hearing it all my life.

KARA

Feel like I'm missing something when I don't hear it.

OLLIE

It's nothing in that rhythm you don't wanna miss. My brother died to that music, they just had the wake for Carter. Iffie, too, a while back.

KARA

/ Who?

OLLIE

Hey, Kara, how come your hands are wet?

KARA

(taking her hand back)

What? Oh, I'm sorry.

OLLIE

No, don't. It's okay, I was just... I'm sorry. I won't bring it up again.

OLLIE holds his hand out for her to hold again.

KARA

I don't think I should.

OLLIE

Why?

KARA

My hands have always been like that.

OLLIE smells his hand.

OLLIE

It's nice. It smells like a garage. Or one a Nessa's cookouts. You know?

KARA

Those cookouts are supposed to be for grown folks.

OLLIE

What am I if not a grown folk?

OLLIE reaches for her hand and KARA lets him hold it.

KARA

You boys wanna be big so damn bad.

OLLIE

Don't you? It's boring as hell being small. Your voice small, your world small, your...

(clears his throat)

...uh everything, is smaller.

KARA

You ain't gon' get much bigger, you know.

OLLIE

Damn, you won't even let nobody have a dream of something.

KARA

What you got dreams of then?

You can tell me.

Beat.

KARA

If not me, who?

OLLIE looks at her, weighing it...

OLLIE

I, like...

I know this sounds dumb, but I wanna...

I wanna be like Ghost, you know?

To not have to run from nothing.

I wonder what it be like to stand in a spot and never move from that spot: that's *my* spot.
Having people see me and shake.

I don't like being the boy who runs. That's how everybody know me: "the boy who runs."
Like I don't got a name but for my reputation.
I'm running right now. That's what got me here with you. I don't know sometimes if it's
better to run or die.

KARA

Ollie... You do know.

OLLIE

Except I don't, Kara.

When you run and people know that's what you do, they feel fit to chase you. Once you
start running, it means you gotta start hiding too. You don't get to find calm 'cause you
always on edge, you know? Always wired.

I ain't sleep right for years, you know that?

KARA

Me neither...

OLLIE

From the second I lay down, I gotta be ready to wake up and start running again. It's been
that way for as long as I remember. I don't know the last time I sat and had dinner with my
mom at the table. We can't. Niggas would see us through the window and they'd come for
me—chase me right into my own house—so me and my mom gotta eat dinner ducked
behind her bed because her son is the boy who run.

KARA

That's shitty.

OLLIE

It's all I know.

KARA

Why don't you... you know, have some guys look out for you?

OLLIE

It's the people closest to you that are most likely to kill you. Or worse. Betray you.

KARA

You don't really believe that?

He doesn't say anything.

KARA

Ollie, am I your only friend?

(on receiving no answer)

You could be safe if—

OLLIE

I could be safe if I was a different person.

KARA

No, don't be a different person. I like the way you are.

He gets up.

KARA

Where are you going?

OLLIE

(shrugs, smiles)

Running.

KARA

You don't have to.

OLLIE reaches into his pocket. He hands something to KARA.

KARA

What is this? It's so blurry.

OLLIE

A picture. Of Us. I hold onto it sometimes. Makes me feel like there's something worth running for.

KARA

Where'd you get this?

OLLIE

I know LeVon that work security. So I asked him to pull a screenshot from the security camera out front.

KARA

Camera?

They look to where the camera used to be.

OLLIE

... huh... there used to be a camera right there...

But anyway, that's yours now. To keep. I'll get another.

KARA

Thank you.

OLLIE

Just doing what I think I should.

KARA

I'll see you around.

OLLIE

I'll see you.

OLLIE exits up one of the alleys.

ZAIRE THE GOAT wanders in.

KARA looks at him. They lock eyes for a while.

It's kinda intense.

KARA is creeped out and scurries up one of the alleys.

ZAIRE THE GOAT walks off again.

Enter GHOST, accompanied by a single GANG BANGER.

GHOST wears a hoodie, a long coat, a short-brim beanie and both his bottom and top row of teeth are gold-plated. He licks his teeth whenever he smiles, pauses in speech, or laughs.

GANG BANGER

—holding it down since you been gone, you know what I'm saying? But we's getting to wondering, you know, what happens when Ghost *don't* come back?

GHOST stares at him.

GANG BANGER

Not that I'm saying—you know, God forbid and all that—but we feel we got to be prepared. Shit fall apart if you don't come back, you know what I'm saying? Like the whole hood'll fuckin' fall in on itself. Who come up behind you is all I'm saying. Since Bishop, you know, who the fuck know where Bishop is.

GHOST

Come here...

GANG BANGER complies.

GHOST punches him across the face and continues to do so even when he falls to the ground.

GHOST

You huffing hard, big bad, you mad? You wan' hit me?

GANG BANGER

... no.

GHOST

What, boy, I ain't hear you?

GANG BANGER

I said No!

GHOST punches him again.

GHOST

Who gon' head the hood when I'm gone? It's gon' be you?

GANG BANGER

Nah, man, nah. That's all you.

GHOST

Word...Brush your clothes down, B, you got your colors dirty.

He does.

GHOST

Nigga, not in front of me, get out my fuckin' face. Matter fact, do me a favor: that nigga that was running out there? The boy who run? Send him to me. Tell him I wanna talk to him.

GANG MEMBER

(as he exits up one of the alleys)

Yo! Where that cheeky muhfucker?? Ghost want him!

GHOST looks around the project.

Fixes his clothes.

Looks up at one of the windows of the project.

GHOST

Nessa and Alexis...

I soon come home.

OLLIE enters. Sheepish at the top of the alley.

OLLIE

They said you wanted me.

GHOST

You know they call you "the boy who run," you know that?

OLLIE nods. GHOST invites him closer.

GHOST

You like being the boy who run?

OLLIE nods no. GHOST nods in response.

GHOST

That's what I thought. How you think you get that name?

OLLIE

'Cause I run.

GHOST

Yeah, nigga, I know—!

*(kisses his teeth; breathes deep;
calms himself)*

Why you running? What you running from?

OLLIE

People like you, I guess.

GHOST

You not running from me now.

OLLIE

You're different. I guess I mean people like you, but not you.

GHOST

You trust me?

OLLIE nods.

GHOST

Hm.

Don't confuse admiration with trust, a'right? Don't trust nobody. Me, Bishop, night, nobody. You hearin' me?

OLLIE nods yes.

GHOST

Nigga, use your voice! Step one? Use your fuckin' voice, you understand me?

OLLIE

yeah, i'm hearin' you...

GHOST

Good. Don't fear nobody who got beating blood on his inside just like you. Respect is earned, not given. It's gon' come a time in your life where you lookin' a man in his eye and you gon' know you either kill him or he kill you. If you stop to think, if you 'fraid at all, if you too busy worried 'bout not dying... well then, shit,

it's gon' be *your* mom crying on the lilies,
it's gon' be *your* shooters burying you,
it's gon' be *your* picture hanging out here over some candles,
you understand me?

And ain't nothing on the other side could console you when you know you died when you ain't have to. When you know you died exactly *because* you was afraid to. This lesson I'm telling you, I'm telling you from my life, you understand me? From my mistakes and what got me here, alright?

OLLIE

Gotchu...

Ghost?

GHOST

Wassup?

OLLIE

What's your life like?

He chuckles.

GHOST

You really wanna know?

OLLIE nods. GHOST gives him a look.

OLLIE

I wanna know. That's why I asked.

GHOST licks his teeth.

GHOST

(scoffs)

What my life like?

I constantly taste metal, what you mean what my life like? I breathe the lives and deaths of men my age and younger. I flip tables, flip scripts, flip bricks; I sprinkle cane from corner to corner but can't flip circumstance. I eat off betraying my brother like Cane and Abel, you understand what I'm saying? I'm God's son like we all is, but to me? God been dead. The gospel of my youth was to duck and to break bread. My skin is gilded with gunmetal and if I'm stabbed in the back, my blood'll drip from the hilt to the tip instead of vice versa. I got a baby boy Bishop, you know?

(scoffs)

What my life like?

I worry for him—Bishop—, I worry for my woman, I worry for my daughter, I worry for they kids and the kids of they kids.

(scoffs)

What my life like?

Fuck, I'on't know, but I hope and I pray that the life that I live ain't the life that my kids do. But like I said, my God been dead, so who do I pray to? Whoever'll listen. Sometimes I think it's just me, words bouncing around my cell like a glorified echo, doomed to die from the second they break free from my thinking, break free from my soul; break free from any semblance of meaning or heart-holding.

(sighs)

What my life like?

Shit, my days numbered and they been that way since I could count. Been that way since I could walk or talk, been that way since I could stutter and choke on the dreams I had for my living that I knew I bet' not speak out else somebody would kill them at they source: me.

(sighs)

What my life like?

I don't see horizons like Nessa do, I don't see choice like Bishop do, I don't see chance independent from circumstance like my baby daughter 'Lexus do. You follow my eyeline, you look from that corner to that corner, that's the extent of my sight; you look up to that window where my family stay, that's the extent of my sight; you look at the three hands on a watch—from a twelve to a twelve—that's the extent of my sight.

And that's not myopic, that's not short-sighted. That's understanding and good sense. That's understanding that you gotta eat and be full before you could make amends. People always wanna tell the niggas-that-ain't-got that all us got to sacrifice, but you talkin' 'bout sacrificing your California Red, you talkin' 'bout sacrificing your second home, I'm talkin' 'bout sacrificing my second skin and that skin live beneath the first one and that skin stretch bigger than me. That skin got my blood, that skin got my babies in it, that skin got my moms and my pops pushing daisies in it. That skin got whole lines and whole branches and beefs and romances. Skin is bloods and pirus and crips and locs, EBTs and pig-PDs, R.I.P.s and people I hope never find peace. That second skin is gang, that skin is kin, that skin is community. That skin is all I got and ain't never been enough to bring me to a tomorrow that's any different than today.

(sighs)

What my life like?

Ain't even a life at all, kid, it's twists and turns I never expected. It's twists and turns I could never get right. It's mistake after mistake 'cause even the right choice is wrong from off top. It's to come to this point right here, standing on this stoop, and still feel like I'm bleeding off my daddy's wounds. I get one wound of my own shit and shit fall apart.

OLLIE

What wounds do you got?

NESSA slams the project window open, she
shouts from the window:

NESSA

Yeah, I wanna hear this. What wounds do you got, Ghost?

GHOST

Nessa, baby,

NESSA

Don't you "Nessa, baby," me, you raggedy muhthafuckah.

GHOST

Oh my God, here we go...

NESSA

Shut the fuck up, Ghost, 'cause I'ma wring your neck if you don't come correct.

GHOST

Why you—with the bullshit already?

OLLIE

This seems like sumn that don't need to involve me, so I'ma...

OLLIE exits.

NESSA

These streets talk, Ghost. You can't see the grapevines, but that brush thick, nigga.

GHOST

Here you go talkin' like a whole ass nigga, all that bass in your voice, can I come home in peace?

NESSA

You cheating nigga, you came away in peace. You wanna come at home too?

GHOST

How 'bout you get my dick from out ya mouth before you talk sideways at me?

NESSA

Oh? Oh? Okay. This nigga got me all the way fucked up. Okay. Alright. Stay right there, then. I'ma show you who with the bullshit.

NESSA slams the window shut.

GHOST

Shit...

GHOST exits. Tryna stay cool, but it's hasty.

NESSA storms out holding a big-ass kitchen knife.

NESSA

Ghost? Ghost, baby, I just wanna talk. Where you at?

The FURIES (ALEC/MEG/TISHA) enter.

MEG

(re: her lotto ticket)

I feel it y'all: this one is a winner.

TISHA

You said that about all the other ones and yet here yo' ass is: broke than ever.

MEG

Okay, see now bish, that's the kinda negative energy you can't be having around me.

(notices NESSA)

Oh Nessa, you out here?

ALEC

And you came out without combing your hair...

TISHA elbows her to shush.

NESSA

Ghost is back.

The FURIES look at each other and make a silent agreement:

THE FURIES

(variations on a theme)

No! Oh my God, is he? I woulda never guessed—how'd you know? We ain't... yeah, we ain't heard nothing about it.

TISHA

Is that knife you holding for something you cooking, or...

You know what, girl, you seem stressed. We just picked up some Haagen Dazs at the store, let's go inside, eat some ice cream

ALEC

—fix your hair—

MEG

And try to calm down, huh?

NESSA

I am hungry. I ain't actually eat nothing messing with Leroy.

MEG/TISHA

I ain't never seen you nowhere near Leroy. Leroy who? Yeah, word, matter-fact, I don't even think I know a Leroy now that you mention it...

They all shuffle inside.

The project is empty.

PIANO MAN enters, wandering aimlessly.

PIANO MAN

Zaire! ... Zaire!

He exits still looking for his goat.

OLLIE and KARA enter from opposite side of the stage and spot each other.

OLLIE

I finally talked to him.

KARA

Who?

OLLIE

Ghost.

KARA

Was it everything you wanted it to be?

OLLIE

More.

KARA

I'm happy.

OLLIE

You don't seem happy.

KARA

That's more about me than...

OLLIE

What's wrong?

KARA

I would wash with the hose out back and sleep in the lot across the street.

OLLIE

But they done started construction.

KARA

Yeah.

OLLIE

I'm sorry. I would let you stay with us, but my mom...

KARA

It's fine.

OLLIE

Where are you gonna go?

KARA

Ain't nowhere for me.

OLLIE

Well, fuck.

KARA

What do you think they'll put there?

OLLIE

Something fancy. Expensive. Meant to push people like you and me out. I guess no life is worth more than money is what my mom says about places like that.

KARA

I'm not afraid of any man / but—

OLLIE

Me neither.

KARA gives him a look.

OLLIE

What?

KARA

Nothing. I guess I'm just afraid of things changing. How are we gonna hang if things change?

OLLIE

What? Not to be mean, but that's kinda dumb. We could always hang, even if things change.

OLLIE takes her hand and they sit a while. Look up.

OLLIE

Holy shit, is that star getting closer?

KARA

Looks a hell of a lot like it.

OLLIE

What do you think it is?

KARA

I don't know, I just hope it don't hit us.

OLLIE

You ever been that lucky?

A loud noise.

OLLIE starts and readies himself to run.

KARA

I thought you said you didn't fear any man.

OLLIE

Yeah, that's... it's a work in progress.

KARA

Enjoy dinner with your mom.

OLLIE

I'll see you later, Kara. Stay safe?

KARA stands and gives OLLIE a hug.

OLLIE

See you later, Kara.

KARA

Later, Ollie.

OLLIE exits.

A "Baa" in the distance.

This scares KARA.

KARA gets up and exits looking over her shoulder.

MEG (OFF)

It didn't work, she still mad. Stop her! One of y'all get her!

TISHA (OFF)

To think this heifer ate my Haagen Dazs and still mad. Ate the whole thing too, ain't leave none for my ass. Now I'm mad, she mad, everybody mad now. I need a cigarette...

The bish took my Paul Malls too!

MEG (OFF)

Nah, they right there actually.

TISHA (OFF)

Oh word. Thank you.

NESSA posts up out front the building.

The FURIES all poke they head out through one window.

MEG

Y'all think she gon' kill him?

TISHA

Girl? Girl. *Gurrrlluh*. I know I wouldn't come home if I was him is all I'm gon' say.

ALEC

She ain't gon' kill the nigga, that's her whole-ass husband.

TISHA

Right, but he cheated on her though.

MEG

You think she would kill him for cheating on her?

TISHA

If I find out I been cheated on? Y'all better write LeVon obituary now.

ALEC

I know that's right.

MEG

Yeah but they got kids and all that.

TISHA

Girl, them kids grown as hell, they shouldn't be hanging 'round they mama house anyway. 'Sides when the last time you saw Bishop? And Alexis poor agoraphobic ass barely leave the house.

MEG

Shit, y'all, I think that's Ghost coming now.

ALEC

Tisha, you got the chips?

TISHA

Yeah, they right here.

MEG

Least she ain't eat these.

They hold the chips just outside the window and try to eat from the bowl at the same time.

They bicker and accidentally drop the bowl. It falls and spills chips everywhere.

NESSA glares at them.

ALEC

Sorry, girl, you go 'head, we'll give you your privacy.

They cower from the window and shut it slowly behind them.

After a moment, GHOST enters.

GHOST

You out here? Did you cool down or?

NESSA

Hm, did I cool down or... or what, Ghost?

GHOST

Nessa, don't. Not now. I just come home.

NESSA

That's more than a lot of people do. Crazy how Ghost always make it back. Who he running with? No. But him? Always.

GHOST

You mean Iffie?

(sighs)

I thought you woulda, I don't know, gave up on that by now. You breathin', I'm breathin', Bishop and 'Lexus breathin'.

NESSA

What the fuck is that supposed to mean? That was my daughter, Ghost; that was your daughter, Ghost.

GHOST

I know that, I'm just saying I didn't mean for—fuck man, why bother? 'Cause you ain't even gon' listen to me.

NESSA

The second you have something worth saying I'ma listen to it, but no, I'm not gon' listen to you wax poetic over the life of my daughter, I'm not gon' do it. I don't have space in my system for your bullshit, Ghost. You made all your own problems. I miss *her*. Every. Day.

GHOST

And I don't?

NESSA

I don't know your life, I don't know what the fuck's happenin' inside your head.

GHOST

All I wanted was to come home. All I ever wanted was to breathe easy. Just...

(twinge of desperation)

to come home to you. To Alexis. A familiar four walls. For fuck's sake, Nessa, you don't know how I done prayed to every god all up and down to make a change. But if god ain't gon' do it, I'll do it. I'll make an oath to you. Be better. Just let me come home.

NESSA

You welcomed home. Cats on every corner lookin' to see if Ghost come back. I hope that content you. 'Cause you come into that house up there? It's gon be cruel on you. You oughta leave now while you can.

GHOST

So what? I'm not welcome to this house I built?

You say this 'bout Iffie, but it's not 'bout her, is it? It's 'cause I been with somebody else, ain't it? It's not my fault, Nessa, I fell in love while away. Any other man would've did the same. But I always knew you was here. Back home. And I wasn't never in love with her the way I love you. What we made, all of us.

NESSA

Loves us? Funny. Don't mention me and his kids was gunned for while he was gone, don't even mention that 'cause he found love while he was away

(mocking)

—hallelujah, praise be to cock, there's nothing a good, long fuck can't cure or make up for. I got blood on my hands, blood in my hair, blood on my lips when I kiss my kids goodnight, but glory be to God: Ghost got his gun off in more ways than one.

GHOST

Nessa, baby, come on...

NESSA

I like to think history repeats itself.

NESSA brandishes one of GHOST's guns. He
check his person and his guns are missing.

His shoulders drop.

NESSA

I'm worried that the word that's gon' bounce off these buildings is that I killed you because you had another woman. Talk'll spread like fire, then it's writ in history: Nessa killed her man over some cheap, crosstown pussy. But you know what? Let the buildings have whatever word they wan' have, but I want you to know... I want *you* to know, Ghost, that I'm killing you for a whole lot more than that. Ironically, you might be the only person who understand all what I'm killing you for. And even then, not quite, right?

I don't know what I believe—what with God and gods and that sky so big for it to not hold a paradise for somebody somewhere—, but I believe I'm never gon' see her again. The hate I hold for you in my heart all but guarantees that.

GHOST

You hate me?

NESSA

Don't worry, I'm the only one.

GHOST

You're the only one I want to not hate me.

NESSA

That brings me a little joy.
Because I do hate you; woven deep into who I am as a person, I hate you.
And it's good to know that that bothers you.

GHOST

Kill me, fuck, I don't care, kill me. But I can't die with you hating me. I'll come back if you kill me. I'll come back breathing a whole sheet of bullets on my inside if I have to.

NESSA

Please do. I'll kill you again. We'll make a game of it.

GHOST stops to listen to something.

GHOST

You hear that? It's the sound of the night here. Like a song sung by all forgotten souls, thrown away and left to their own worst devices. I engineered that sound. I built that sound.

A commotion offstage.

GHOST

Henny hour: drinks on the rocks and rocks on the wind. Everybody wanna have a good time for the weekend.

NESSA

Sunset Sunday always comes. For everyone. Can't run from it. Four of them every month. Count them.

She raises the gun.

NESSA

One Sunday...

GHOST

What do you want from me? an apology? a concession? a sermon? a song and a dance: a hemmed homily or hymn? I'm not a religious man, Nessa; not that I know of, I can't offer you that. I'm not a humble man, I ain't got the kinds of gifts a humble man got, Nessa, but what I got is love for you. I promise you, Nessa, I love you and I love our family and you can't kill me for what's been put in me. I can't and couldn't help it. I ain't mean for shit to come down on you, come down on them, come down on her, but I did the best I knew how. You think y'all only get shot at because of me and who I am,—think y'all only crying 'cause I'm hoarding grief, but that's your lot too Nessa. You was born here just like me whether you wanna admit it or not.

I'm prescient now, seeing things like the Piano Man and what I see is this not gon' make you happy, Nessa, put the gun down off me... Ain't gon' bring her back.

NESSA

(talking over his plea)

Two Sundays...

NESSA cocks the gun. A shot rings in the distance elsewhere.

GHOST

But me? I will come back, Nessa, I mean it. I got the more conviction to do it than she ever had. You gon' shoot me, tell me you love me. Tell me you love me before you kill me else I'ma come back for you whatever way I can figure how. A man like me don't die, you know that. I'm not dumb, I know my place in this project. A man like me keep on breathin' from

the vacuum where discarded souls go. I'm deep under your skin, whether you wanna admit that or not, I'm under your skin, Nessa.

NESSA

(ibid.)

Three Sundays...

GHOST

I'm watchin' you and I'm wondrin' what you know of consequence? Long as you had cause, long as you known crime, you had me. Like a buffer against the worst parts of yourself. You kill me, people'll look at you different. You think you can trust people now? You kill me, everyone'll see you through the frame of vendetta. It's a power game and you ain't got the power I got. Everything you got, you got through me. Everything you got is mine but parceled out, Nessa. On god or my grandmother, I swear to you: this'll be the worst thing you ever did. The biggest regret you ever live through, the condemnation to your kids behind you. Just Let me be Great. Since I was a kid, it's been like a crown—a cursed crown—

(he takes off his hat)

can't nobody see it, but everybody chasing it. Only a handful can wear it, that's how much it take out of you. Heavy is the head that wears the crown, but heavier still is the hand that holds it.

(he tosses his hat at NESSA; she catches it without compromising her aim)

That's not surrenderable or transferable. You said you don't know what you believe, but I know what I believe. I believe that men who live good, men who become Great., become gods when they die. You believe whatever you believe, but I'll believe in me. I'll believe in my own continuance. I'll govern this hood—Ghost is King—this life or the next. I got youngbloods that'll / come for you.

NESSA

(ibid.)

Four.

NESSA fires and the sound of a single shot echoes through the complex. The buildings—all of them—rattle in place.

GHOST collapses to the ground.

NESSA lowers her gun.

NESSA

And then it's Monday...

And, for the record, Ghost, the worst thing I ever did was have children with you. No one should suffer the House of Atreus. That's the biggest regret I'll ever live through.

But I'll change that. I'ma govern over the hood with goodness, with kindness, with giving.

All noises stop.

We can hear the wind it's so quiet.

NESSA feels watched suddenly, she turns to exit to the building.

KARA enters from the wing. From the periphery of the scene, she looks over the dead body of Ghost.

NESSA looks over her shoulder and notices.

NESSA stops and briefly considers the project around her.

NESSA

(to KARA)

C'mon. It's a extra place setting up there anyway.

KARA

What?

NESSA

C'mon in here. You need it, you don't need to be spending the night outside. You ain't got no parents, no place to stay, and you best not trust nobody out here. Someone should've beat me to it, but since they didn't...

NESSA holds open the door and gestures for KARA to follow her.

KARA hesitates, but ultimately opts to follow her.

OLLIE walks in: sees where Ghost's body is, sees where NESSA is, and sees KARA walking in with her.

KARA exits with NESSA guiding her. And NESSA slams the door shut behind them.

OLLIE is left alone with Ghost's dead body.

Neither body moves.

From somewhere far, a large mass is throttling
against the wind, throttling toward the project,
toward us—we can only hear the rush. It's getting
faster and faster and louder and louder...

Silence. Lights down to black.

End of Act I

ACT II

post-“AGAMMEMNON”

or

/ a first funerary service /

ACT II

-

an intermission

With lights low: there are open-palmed Jesus and Virgin Mary Catholic candles. A framed poster-sized picture of Ghost. On cardboard nearby, messages of condolence and grief are scrawled sloppily in washed-out Sharpie.

An empty casket centerstage is at an incline so that its plush interior is visible and people stand about the casket holding orthodox candles.

The FURIES—in hooded cloaks—carry Ghost’s body in. The body is covered up; barely visible under colorful, chalky powders.

The GANG BANGER steps forward and, indulging in the moment, grandstands placing Ghost’s hat into the coffin with him.

A quartet of paul bearers—The FURIES aided by a morose OLLIE—lift the casket to their shoulders.

All hum a tune of “Soon and Very Soon.”

At the tail end of the intermission, the quartet slowly carries the casket off into the wing and the procession of mourners follows them, maintaining their song.

A beat or so.

A MAN IN A MASK enters from the wing, kneels, and pays his respects at the condolence board. He exits, looking over his shoulder to make sure no one’s seen him.

Lights down.

End of Act II

ACT III

“LIBATION BEARERS”

or

/ inheritance. /

ACT III

The funerary procession has been cleared.

The FURIES sit in chairs set up on the stoop.

TISHA is smoking a Paul Mall and eating a pint of Haagen Dazs Butter Pecan.

MEG

You ain't careful, them Paul Malls gon' kill you.

TISHA

Goddamn, heifer! you sound like LeVon. You know how hard it is to kill a Fury? A motherfuckin' Fury? A cig ain't gon' do it, sis, least of all this crusty fuckin' Paul Mall.

Listen to me, babe: I don't die, I just deliver the dead.

TISHA puffs.

TISHA

You know, I never asked: why *do* people call us the Furies anyway? We don't e'en get mad like that, you know what I mean?

ALEC

(*to MEG*)

Watch this,

(*to TISHA*)

Is that... Apollo?!

TISHA jumps up.

TISHA

Where that nigga?! On God, I'll beat his ass!! God try to stop me, I'll beat his ass too.

(*realizes the joke*)

Don't do that shit. Don't fuckin' do that shit, Alec. That's not funny. You got my heart going.

(*deep breath*)

My sinuses is... you know I got sensitive sinuses.

MEG sees us.

MEG

Oh, y'all, them folks is back.

TISHA

What folks—

(she sees us)

Oh my God.

ALEC

So, what? Y'all want filling in?

TISHA

When the last time they was here?

MEG

I saw some of 'em at Ghost's Homegoing.

TISHA

Some of 'em?

MEG

Yeah, I think some of 'em went to pee. Some of 'em went to get booze.

ALEC

Hm, they found out there's three more acts, huh?

TISHA

But do they know that Act IV is—

ALEC

Shh-shh-shh-shh.

TISHA

Ok, ok, uh... I guess let's fill 'em in.

THE FURIES

(MEG): Twice upon a time there was a boy who died...

(ALEC): Ghost gone, but the house stay haunted; so many wanted men wanted dem dead.

(TISHA): I hear that boy Bishop been smothered in the boondocks.

(MEG): Died like his daddy did,

(ALL): —gang!—,

(ALEC): Dead the House of Atreus,

(TISHA): In Debt the House of Atreus,

(MEG): I Bet the House of Atreus fall to the

(ALL): —gang!—,

(ALEC): I'm a bonafide, born-bred,

(TISHA): qualified, corn-fed

(MEG): personified, sworn-dead

(ALL): —gang!—,

(ALEC): Justice is blind but can't unsee what she saw

(*TISHA*): October's Very Own sown seeds of the law

(*ALEC*): The hood stood by like a jury judging flaws

(*MEG*): But with old loyalties, they ignore just cause.

ZAIRE THE GOAT (OFF)

Baa.

PIANO MAN (OFF)

I hear somebody said Justice was blind.

The FURIES are all immediately exasperated;
they kiss their teeth, throw their hands up, etc.

PIANO MAN enters, strident—more confident
than any man should ever be.

He has ZAIRE THE GOAT strapped to his chest
in a baby bjorn.

PIANO MAN

Piano Man. Head nigga in change. In charge of justice. Now *y'all see* what *I see*.

Beat.

ALEC and MEG both turn and look at TISHA.

TISHA

Don't look at me. I'm not gon' do it. I'm not gon' do it. It would be too easy.

MEG

Well, you was right.

PIANO MAN

Um, I know I was right 'cause I actually see the future. Why is that so hard for y'all?

ALEC

What happens next?

PIANO MAN

Ho, I'm not telling you! You know how mean y'all was to me? Course, I could tell you if I
feel so obliged...

TISHA

(*not with the bullshit*)

You gon' tell us 'cause you like the attention.

PIANO MAN

Shutup!

(smug)

Hmph...

Look at y'all: groveling.

(scoffs)

Piano Man finally getting the respect I deserve. This is a cause for celebration.

He takes a cigar from his breast pocket.

PIANO MAN

Who got a light?

They don't move or say anything.

PIANO MAN

I know y'all the Furies, I know what powers y'all got! I know y'all got a fuckin' light.

MEG approaches him and snaps a finger and a small flame appears in her palm. She uses it to light his cigar.

PIANO MAN

Thank you.

He takes a puff, real grandiose-like.

PIANO MAN

Mm...

He immediately coughs on the cigar smoke... and coughs some more...and a little more... and one last little one...

Having endured a near-death experience, he ashes the rest of the cigar.

PIANO MAN

(gasping for breath)

... ahem, a celebration.

He puts the stomped-out cigar back in his breast pocket.

PIANO MAN

Ok. Zaire has convinced me to tell you the rest of what I've seen.

ZAIRE THE GOAT

Baa.

PIANO MAN

Yes, that's right, Zaire, but don't speak when I'm speaking, it's rude.

I'm only gon' say it once, so listen: bodies gon' wash up on the stoop, the whole project at the mercy of the sins of the father.

TISHA

That's what you said before.

PIANO MAN

And you didn't listen to me then, maybe you'll listen to me now.

ZAIRE THE GOAT

Baa.

PIANO MAN

Zaire, didn't I say—wait, don't make that face. That's the face you make when you—ergh—oh no...

MEG

What is he...?

They smell something and cover their noses.

PIANO MAN

He's shitting! That's that face he makes when he's shitting!

PIANO MAN beelines for the project.

MEG takes out a perfume and sprays it in the air.

ALEC coughs at this.

ALEC

What-is-that? It's – not – helping...

MEG

I got the new Chanel perfume.

TISHA

Where'd you get it at?

MEG

20 bucks. Right around the corner.

TISHA

(looking at the bottle)

Uh, Meg, "Chanel" is spelt with a 'C' not an 'S'...

ALEC

Just like Piano Man to come out here and ruin somebody good time.

TISHA

Better him than the mystery man.

MEG

What mystery man?

TISHA

Y'all ain't heard? Ight, well, LeVon was talking to some of his security friends. And like three of 'em say they seen a mystery man in a mask walking 'round the hood.

ALEC

What's he doing in a mask?

TISHA

Why would I know the answer to that? Did I put the mask on him?

MEG

You think he's gonna come to the project?

TISHA

If y'all don't stop with these fool ass rhetorical questions.

ALEC

All I'm saying is Piano Man said something about bodies washing up on the stoop. What if the masked man is like a movie killer?

MEG

Oh shit, I didn't even think about that.

TISHA

A masked killer? This look like a cabin in the woods to you? I wish a nigga would try to run up on me.

ALEC

He not gon' be coming for you.

MEG

For who then?

TISHA

I mean, they only started seeing him recent. You think it got something to do with Ghost?

MEG

Shit. Ghost gone but the house stay haunted

TISHA

So many wanted men wanted dem dead.

ALEC

So what do we do?

TISHA

I mean, we best look out for Nessa, right? If she making stew and trying to make good happen in the hood, that's someone worth watching over.

NESSA exits the building with KARA.

NESSA

(to ALEXUS, who remains OFF)

It should soon finish. Bring it down when it do. And then bring yo' ass outside. How exciting can the same fuckin' couch be? You sat in it already. It know yo' ass and yo' ass know it.

The FURIES conspicuously flank NESSA and KARA.

ALEC

Hey, gurl, wass good withchu?

MEG

You got that nigga Ghost good, didn't you?

TISHA

Don't mind us, we just making sure you ok.

This creeps NESSA out.

NESSA

Hey, y'all. Y'all don't got to be all up under me.

THE FURIES

(backing up a bit)

Word, word, word, word, word...

They back up a bit.

NESSA and KARA sit at the edge of the stoop.

NESSA points down the block.

NESSA

That. Right there. That's where I want you to deliver the stew. Give it to a lady named Fee and her son Tavis. There and back, do you understand me?

KARA

Yes, Miss Nessa.

MEG

You not serving the stew yourself?

TISHA

After the Leroy thing?

MEG

What Leroy thing? Wasn't no Leroy thing, *remember Tisha?*

TISHA

You right. I must be confusing things. 'Scuse me...

NESSA

It's a lot of folks mad I killed Ghost. I can't open myself up like that.

ALEC

You know we wouldn't let nobody do nothing to you, though, right?

KARA

Why would anyone wanna do something to you?

NESSA

I can protect myself.

KARA

Miss Nessa, why would / anyone—?

NESSA

Don't worry, nothing's gonna happen to me.

TISHA

You can't know that, though.

MEG

Tisha! You scaring the child!

TISHA

I don't give a fuck 'bout no child. I don't even know where she came from, just showed the fuck up one day. No mom, no dad, just her, just here. Mighta killed her parents, might be a serial killer. Child, are you a serial killer?

KARA

... no.

TISHA

"...no."

Tell me that wasn't the 'no' of a serial killer?

Got the Menendez brothers' long lost sister sitting in the hood and you worried 'bout scaring the child.

MEG

Tisha!

The sound of a car driving by.

DRIVER (OFF)

(passing; voice only)

I hope you burn in hell you fuckin' hag!

(he spits)

NESSA is hit and stands up.

NESSA

Flying fuck!

ALEC

Oh my God, Nessa, you alright?

NESSA

I'm fine, he just spit at me. He didn't shoot me. Yet. There's that to be grateful for, I guess.

KARA

Why'd that man spit at you?

NESSA

Because I killed the thing he worshipped.

KARA

/ You mean Ghost?

NESSA

The thing he thought he would someday become. Yeah, Ghost. And rather than reckon with himself, he finds it easier to wish me dead.

MEG

You think he really woulda—

(throat slice gesture)

skkk.

NESSA

I wouldn't put it past anyone.

The FURIES all look at each other.

THE FURIES

We got you, girl, / don't you worry about it, / bet his ass won't do it again...

They run off into the wing after the car.

NESSA

No, y'all don't have to... okay, well.

KARA

(pointing to somewhere across the street)

That's where I used to sleep.

NESSA

Right there? In that empty lot?

KARA

It's not empty anymore, they're building in it, but yeah.

NESSA

How long?

KARA

As long as I could remember.

NESSA

How long is that? You're what, 13?

KARA

Something like that. I don't know. I just remember waking up there one day.

TISHA (OFF)

Wait, what the fuck?

ALEC (OFF)

Where'd the car go?

MEG (OFF)

Y'all, hol'up wait, 'cause he gon' have to come back 'round this way.

TISHA (OFF)

We'll wait for him, but the nigga disappeared like a fuckin' hoodlum Houdini and shit...

NESSA

What do you mean? Like, in your memory, there's nothing and then you wake up in the lot?

KARA

Yeah, kinda like I was born there. Do you remember when you were born?
Do most people?

NESSA

Well, no, I would venture to guess most people don't, in fact, remember when they were born, but if you do, that's a rare thing. To be born conscious. I guess the one time I've felt reborn, or... whatever you wanna call that. Is the day that Iffie passed. I looked out the window and the entire world had ripped itself apart, tearing at the seams, and bleeding into the sky. So much so, actually, that it wasn't blue / but purple and pink...

KARA

But purple and pink...

NESSA

Yeah, exactly.

KARA

The sky was purple and pink when I woke up in the lot.

NESSA

You're kidding...

KARA nods no.

NESSA

Guess the world saw fit to throw us together, huh?

KARA

Miss Nessa?

NESSA

Just Nessa is fine.

KARA

I ain't never had nobody, you know?

NESSA

Me neither.

KARA

and why is that?

NESSA

I really, really wish I could tell you.

KARA

Will it always be like that?

NESSA

It feels late for me, maybe, but I got a hope for you.

ALEXUS (OFF)

Agh, goddammit!

NESSA stands from the stoop.

NESSA

C'mon, come grab this stew for me.

ALEXUS stumbles out from the project carrying
the stew pot.

ALEXUS

Motherfuck, this is heavy! You stewing a whole damn cow or what?

NESSA

Language. 'Fore I make you carry it all the way to the kitchen.

ALEXUS places the stew down. KARA picks it
up.

ALEXUS

How the—

NESSA

(to ALEXUS)

See: when you only sit on the couch, your muscles do this thing called atrophy. So by now,
your arms is probably all bone and skin and offbrand cocoa butter and not much else.

(to KARA)

Fee and Tavis. And no one else. You understand me?

KARA nods.

NESSA

Good, go on. We'll watch you from here.

KARA exits carrying the pot with ease.

NESSA

Thank you.

ALEXUS

Sure.

NESSA

See? Outside. Smell it. Mm. Fresh Air.

ALEXUS makes a face.

NESSA

I didn't say it smelt good, I said it was fresh air.

ALEXUS

Cool, well, my eyes are watering at all the fresh air so I'ma / go back inside.

NESSA stops her.

NESSA

No, you're not.

ALEXUS

Why not?

NESSA

You gotta get used to being outside. *We* gotta look out for that little girl and *I* gotta be careful how much people see me outside. That mean I need help.

ALEXUS

Why we watching her anyway? Is she, like, your bastard child or something? Like, don't get me wrong, I get it if she is but don't get me all tied up in it.

NESSA

Wasn't no one fuckin' around. Well, your father was, but his soul was dead long before that. I just, I do... I don't know, I get a feeling about her.

ALEXUS

What kinda feeling?

NESSA

You know she showed up the day Iffie died?

ALEXUS

That's a weird coincidence.

NESSA

Right. But is it, though? It's so... like, what if... look, listen... I don't know what gods is watching over this project—

A small explosion a ways away.

NESSA and ALEXUS both flinch.

ALEXUS

Did that star just explode?

NESSA

Probably something about the atmosphere, right?

ALEXUS

Are you asking me?

NESSA

It still fuckin' looks like it's getting closer.

ALEXUS

Didn't even slow down...

TISHA (OFF)

There that nigga go! Ay, you, you the one that spit at Nessa?

DRIVER (OFF)

Man, fuck you!

Tires screeching. Metal crashing.

ALEC (OFF)

Woah there, guy, we got a few words for you.

MEG (OFF)

Ight, y'all, we on his ass.

A man – presumably the DRIVER – screams from somewhere nearby.

OLLIE enters from off.

He and NESSA lock eyes and stare at one another a while. OLLIE is grilling her.

ALEXUS whispers to her.

ALEXUS

That's Kara little friend, I think.

NESSA

I don't care who he is.

(to OLLIE)

Can I help you? What you looking all in my face for?

He ducks his head as he walks around her, when
he thinks she can't see him, he stares at her again.

NESSA

Don't look at me cross, lil' boy, I'm not your age.

OLLIE hovers at the door.

NESSA

Boy, I said if you don't go on inside before I cross them eyes permanently.

He exits to the project.

The FURIES reenter, they're laughing between
themselves.

TISHA

Did you see his face, like, "wahhh, don't kill me!"

ALEC

I'm still weak at: did you see how fast the nigga in the back ran out the car?

MEG

And then the look on his face when he died, like,

She reenacts it. A painfully silent beat.

ALEC

Ok, that's just dark. Why would you even go there?

TISHA

Yeah, like, seriously, someone just died, Meg. Have some tact.

MEG

But y'all just—he just—"died"? We killed him. I don't think I was the only one there 'cause
I distinctly remember two heifers on either side of me that was gleeful to kill the nigga.

ALEC

Yeah, but you took it somewhere weird.

MEG

I just said the same shit y'all said!

TISHA

(*re: ALEXUS*)

Oh, shit, would y'all look at that: the bish got legs.

ALEXUS

Hey, Aunty Tisha. Aunty Alec. Aunty Meg.

MEG

It's good to see you.

ALEC

I thought I might never again.

NESSA

Look at that, people miss you out here. You know who don't miss you? That fuckin' couch. I bet those ass-shaped dents are stretching for dear life, breathing for the first time in weeks.

ALEC

What you all holed up in the house for anyway?

ALEXUS

What's out here for me?

MEG

Shit, well, she got a point there.

TISHA

She do: it ain't nothing but people dicking around and dying out here.

ALEC

(*side-eying MEG*)

As Meg so rudely reenacted.

NESSA

Still, though, this is where you from. Whether you like it or not. The bad parts can't make you forget that there's community here. You don't get to stay inside and just pretend the outside doesn't exist.

TISHA

Ok, kumbaya.

ALEC

Shut up Tisha.

MEG

And how you gon' pretend the outside don't exist when the outside bleed inside?

ALEC

I know that's right.

ALEXUS

You mean like when your mom kills your dad?

MEG

Well I have not, personally, had that experience, but yeah something like that.

NESSA

Are you angry with me?

ALEXUS

Not really. He was dead in my mind a long time ago.
So were you.

NESSA nods.

NESSA

Because of...

ALEXUS

Iffie, yeah. Everyone is basically dead to me after Iffie.

NESSA

Oh, but that's what I was saying! I... phew, okay... I don't know what gods is watching over this project, but sumn among them is giving me a second chance, is giving us all a second chance. Iffie was right round her age, I could get to mom again, you could get a sister.

ALEXUS

It doesn't work like that.

NESSA

But it could!

ALEC

That's really warm-hearted of you, Nessa.

TISHA

But I kinda gotta agree with Alexis. You can't just one-to-one like that.

NESSA

But what if I'm not the one doing it? This is, like, bigger than me. Come on: Iffie disappears and she shows up. And I *willed* Iffie to come back into my life; I prayed, I meditated, I fuckin' sacrificed pieces of myself to every god I could conceive of.

I'm a shell of myself, did you know that? I don't look out from my eyes, but from somewhere deep inside me – I don't speak from my gullet but from somewhere in my gut, and that all is worth it, really, if I can get some semblance of Iffie back.

ALEXUS

Ma...

NESSA

Y'all don't look at me like that.

MEG

Nessa...

NESSA

Fuck you, don't "Nessa" me. Don't patronize me, I'm not a child.

ALEC

No one's calling you a child.

NESSA

You are! With your eyes! This is the same shit fuckin' Ghost used to do to me.

MEG extends an arm to console her.

NESSA

Don't fuckin' touch me!

OLLIE exits the project, wearing Ghost's old colors.

NESSA sees him.

NESSA

Little boy!

He retreats back into the project.

TISHA

We just trying to look out for you.

NESSA

Don't! Look out for that little girl, look out for Alexis, I'm a grown fuckin' woman, thank-you.

ALEC

We could look out for them if that's what you want...

NESSA

Are you dense? Isn't that what I just said I wanted?

ALEXUS

Ma, if you want, I can go get you some water or something.

NESSA

Why are y'all talking to me like I'm going fucking crazy, I'm not going fucking crazy, I'm just thinking out loud. Is there no safe place for me to do that?

KARA reenters.

KARA

Miss Nessa.

NESSA

Just Nessa, Kara, just Nessa. Did you

KARA

Fee and Tavis.

NESSA

Right. Right. Right. Good. At least somebody is listening to me. Come on.

KARA

Actually, could I stay out and watch the falling star?

NESSA

For what?

ALEXUS

If she want to, I could stay out here with her.

NESSA

For real?

ALEXUS

Uh, yeah, I'll watch out for her.

NESSA

Ok. Cool. Don't stay out here too late.

ALEXUS

We both know that I will literally not do that.

NESSA

Ok. Good. That's good. Thank you, 'Lexus.

KARA

Yeah, thank you.

ALEXUS

Yeah, of course.

NESSA

Ok, I'ma go inside then.

ALEC

We'll walk in withchu, girl.

MEG

Ay, y'all, we'll be back out here in a minute. Don't get into nothing while we gone.

KARA

What would we get into?

ALEXUS

Ain't nothing but dicking around and dying.

TISHA

That is true.

MEG

Yeah, well, don't do those. Find something else.

The FURIES and NESSA exit to the center project.

KARA

Why'd you really stay out here with me?

ALEXUS

I don't think I wanna be around her right now.

(re: the lot across the street)

'S that really where you used to sleep?

KARA

Every night.

ALEXUS

Sorry you had to live like that.

KARA

That's just how things are sometimes.

ALEXUS

That doesn't make it any more fair.

KARA

That's true.

ALEXUS

Is there anything you miss about it? Like the freedom of it?

KARA

Hardly. I wish I could wipe all those nights from my mind. Just totally become a new version of myself.

KARA plays with her hair.

ALEXUS

I get that.

KARA

Hey, do you miss your sister?

ALEXUS

What?

KARA

Miss Nessa was talking about a daughter named Iffie, I just assumed it was your sister.

ALEXUS

Yeah, no, she was my sister. I'm just shocked you brought her up.

KARA

Why?

ALEXUS

For so long, no one ever did, you know? You learn to make your mourning quiet so it doesn't ruin anyone else's day.

KARA

But you still miss her? You said you're still in mourning.

ALEXUS

Yeah. I think this is just where I live now.

KARA

On the couch, you mean?

ALEXUS

No, Kara, I mean in mourning.

KARA

Oh. At least you know what you're in mourning for. I don't know where my parents are, but whenever Ollie would get to talking about his mom, I always felt like I had lost something. The kinda something that you could never un-lose. Does that make sense?

ALEXUS

Of course it does.

KARA

I'm sorry about your sister.

ALEXUS

It's not your fault. It's my dad's. Or his dad's. Or his dad's maybe. Do you get the trend?

KARA

I think so. A penis – a penis – a penis.

ALEXUS

Right. Sins of the father and all that. Cycles of violence around here tend to be patrilineal.

KARA

What does—

ALEXUS

Down through the male line.

KARA

Thank you.
Can they help it?

ALEXUS

I mean, if they wanted to, sure.

KARA

Sins of the father.

ALEXUS

Sins of the father.

KARA

You think that's why I ended up how I ended up?

ALEXUS

I think that's complicated.

KARA

It'd just be nice to have a reason.

ALEXUS

Maybe. But the absence of a reason is where we get to make our own story for ourselves. Which can be good or bad, but it's a kind of power. Having a reason means nothing if you don't act against it. Like if you knew x person was to blame for where you were, would you live differently?

Beat.

KARA

You know that I'm a child, right?

ALEXUS

Sorry. All I do is sit inside and think about these things. I look out the window and think of how different it'd all be if everyone were given that chance. Everyone here has to grow up so fast, I forget that for as long as you're a kid, you continue to experience the world as a kid. Whether you're good at hiding that or not.

A roof can't wholly protect you from circumstances. They bleed outside in. But... whenever I would want to change myself when I was your age, I would... change my hair.

KARA

Oh my God, I wanna change my hair! Alexis, can I change my hair?

ALEXUS

Of course.

The FURIES enter from the center building.

ALEXUS

But I would need to grab some things.

ALEC

Where you going?

ALEXUS

The beauty supply.

TISHA

Ight den, we'll walk with you.

ALEXUS

You don't have to.

MEG

No one said we have to. We need to get stuff too.

TISHA

You think all *this* happens by itself. "I woke up like this"? Heifer, no. Beauty comes before work only in the dictionary.

ALEXUS

Okay, yeah, I could use the company.

TISHA

Good, and you girl—

MEG

Kara.

TISHA cuts her eyes at MEG.

TISHA

Ka-RUH, go on up there with Nessa. You don't need to be out here by yourself.

ALEXUS

I'll come get you when I get back, okay?

KARA

Okay.

ALEXUS and the FURIES exit to the wing.

KARA gets up and heads toward the project.

Just as she's about to go inside, OLLIE exits.

He brushes by her in the doorway.

He doesn't look at her at all.

KARA

Oh. Hey, Ollie.

OLLIE

Hey.

Sorry.

Guess I'll see you.

KARA

Ok. Are you—

OLLIE

I'm fine.

KARA

Ok, yo, what's good with you? Ever since Ghost passed, you been acting a type of way. And I get it: you're sad or whatever, but I ain't had nothing to do with that.

OLLIE

Didn't you, though?

KARA

What?

OLLIE

I saw you with Nessa. When she killed him. And now you're staying with her.

KARA

Ok?

OLLIE

I thought we were good friends.

KARA

Were?

OLLIE

Because I thought we believed the same things.

KARA

You don't like that I'm in the house.

OLLIE

I'm happy you in the house, I don't like that you staying with Nessa.

KARA

Who are you to tell me who I can and can't stay with?

OLLIE

Your only friend.

KARA

Um, earth to dickhead: I have two women in that house who are really nice to me.

OLLIE

What you talking about is family not friendships.

KARA

And who is you? Dr. Nig-mund Freud? Goddamn. Where all your friends, then?

OLLIE

You know I lost a lot of people. And now one more of them is dead.

KARA

Ghost? Ghost wasn't your friend, Ollie.

OLLIE

He was my mentor.

KARA

No the fuck he wasn't.

OLLIE

He was looking out for me.

KARA

No the fuck he *definitely* was not. He saw you wanted to be like him and he would've used that to make you useful to him. I think you forget I lived out here. I saw him for who he was and how he moved. I saw him; you know, probably when you was ducking behind your mother's bed eating dinner.

OLLIE

That's why I shouldn'ta told you nothing, you just throw it back at me... I am trying my best, Kara.

KARA

So is everyone else, you're not special! You had a house. Security, stability; I didn't have even that. Am I supposed to feel pity for you?

OLLIE

No one asked for all that. Don't put words in my mouth.

KARA

All I'm saying you wouldn't be the boy who run if you stopped running.

OLLIE

It's not that easy.

KARA

You made all your own worst problems. You're just like him.

OLLIE

What difference does choice make when your circumstances always stay the same? I've tried to make the right choices. And then what? Oh, that's right. I wake up: still here, still under duress, still hungry, still running. You don't know what my life has been like, Kara.

KARA

And you don't know what mine has been like! Except only one of us is actually trying to understand the other one.

OLLIE

Is it really that much work?

KARA

I don't know, you tell me. At least I'm trying, you're not even trying.

OLLIE

I am trying, my fuck, I am trying. But what good is it gonna do me?

KARA

Next time you talk to me, try harder and find out. Until then, consider your friend-count a tight little taint—nigga, a zero—and you bet' not try and look at me through the hole in the middle. I don't wanna see your face. Goodbye, Oliver.

And you know what? I always have to explain myself to people. I was just hoping I wouldn't have to with you.

From far, the siren song starts up.

CHORUS OF KIDS (OFF)

Hootie Hoo!
(*Hootie Hoo!*)

It gets gradually louder as it gets closer.

CHORUS OF KIDS (OFF)

Hootie Hoo!
(*Hootie Hoo!*)

The sound of shuffling inside the project.

KARA

Guess everyone'll come out now. See if you can count your friends among them.

OLLIE

No one's coming out, Kara.

KARA

What? Why not? The last time—

NESSA emerges from the center building.

NESSA

You don't hear them calling? Y'all—where's Alexis?

KARA

She went to run an errand.

NESSA

(kisses her teeth)

But you hear them, don't you? Get your little self inside.

KARA

Why isn't everyone coming out this time?

The siren song gets louder.

NESSA

Kara, come on!

KARA

But why—

NESSA

Because Ghost is dead.

KARA

Huh?

OLLIE

That show of solidarity you saw? That was under Ghost, not under your 'mom' here.

NESSA

(lightly slaps him)

Little boy, what did I tell you? I'm not your age.

NESSA grabs KARA's arm and jerks her inside, slamming the door behind her.

OLLIE looks around, trying to gauge where the siren is coming from.

He checks his watch and then starts out toward one of the wings, head down.

The lights start oscillating over the set: red and blue.

A MAN IN A MASK emerges from one of the alleys, he grabs OLLIE and covers his mouth as he does. OLLIE struggles while this happens.

MAN IN A MASK

Fuckin' brat! C'mon.

In one motion, the man emerges from one alley, grabs OLLIE, and exits up the other alley.

The song and lights get stronger and dominate the space for a moment.

The moment passes, the lights fade back to normal and the siren song decrescendos with distance.

Once the scene is back to normal, OLLIE scampers—on hands and knees—from the alley.

The MAN IN A MASK walks with pace after him.

OLLIE

What the fuck? Who the *fuck* are you?

OLLIE tries throwing rocks at him.

OLLIE

Get the fuck away from me!

MAN IN A MASK

Don't you know better than to be caught alone outside when 12 rolls by? I don't know how old you are, but you too damn old to be that damn dumb.

OLLIE gets to his feet. He squares up.

OLLIE

Say it again.

MAN IN A MASK

Calm down. No one's fighting you Jheri-Curl Jackie Chan.

OLLIE

Then what's your business with me? Why'd you "save" me?

MAN IN A MASK

You're the boy who runs, right?

OLLIE

I'm not the boy who runs. That's not who I am. I'm Ghost's godson.

MAN IN A MASK

What's that make me then?

OLLIE

Who are you?

MAN IN A MASK takes off his mask to reveal a striking resemblance to Ghost.

BISHOP

His flesh-and-blood son.

OLLIE

Bishop.

BISHOP

Good to meet you.

OLLIE

You're back.

BISHOP

It looks that way, yeah.

OLLIE

What made you come back? / It's been long.

BISHOP

Bad advice from a good god... Or good advice from a bad god. I can't tell which yet.

OLLIE

I don't think I could tell a god from a man.

BISHOP

You and seven billion other people.

OLLIE

What was the advice?

BISHOP

If I told you, it'd kill you; a fitting but cruel welcome to the House of Atreus.

OLLIE

I don't know sometimes if it's better to run or die.

BISHOP

Pick your poison. Though, what I will say is that everyone dies. Not everyone runs.

OLLIE

Not everyone dies young.

BISHOP

You ever seen a man die?

OLLIE

no...

... yes.

BISHOP

The next time you do, ask him how old he feels. Whether he's seven or seventy. You'd be surprised at the answer.

OLLIE

You talk to a lot of dying men?

BISHOP

If you get my age—if you're really his godson—you will too.

OLLIE

How do you figure?

BISHOP

The dead is part of the deal. It follows, hovers, orbits. If you're there, it's there right by you.

OLLIE

'S that what you learned while you were away?

BISHOP

Among other things.

OLLIE

How much did you keep up on things here?

BISHOP

Some.

OLLIE

'Cause I don't wanna bearer-of-bad-news you, but—

BISHOP

My mother is the one who killed Ghost?

OLLIE

You're well kept up.

BISHOP

Only on the important things.

OLLIE

How do you... feel?

BISHOP

How do *you* feel? You clearly don't like her.

OLLIE

I don't care about her one way or the other.

BISHOP

Tell that to your posture—defensive—, to your voice—shaky—, and to your shoulders—squared up. Lie to yourself, godson of Ghost, don't lie to me.

OLLIE

My name is Ollie.

BISHOP

Did you know you speak faster when you're angry, Ollie?

OLLIE

No.

BISHOP

Well, you do. So, make me see it, godson of Ghost: why do you hate my mother?

OLLIE

I don't, I can't—... I just... Sometimes you just *know* about a person, you know?

BISHOP

Hm.

Ten outta ten for the conviction, two outta ten for the reasoning. Tell me, Ollie, is it worth it holding that much hate in your heart?

OLLIE

I ain't never said I was holding hate, you said that.

BISHOP

I just say what I saw.

OLLIE

Maybe you need to see better.

BISHOP

So anger then. Is it worth it holding that much anger in your heart?

OLLIE

I can tell you ain't been 'round here a while.

BISHOP

How's that?

OLLIE

You see anger and desperation as one and the same thing.

BISHOP

You can't direct desperation at one person.

OLLIE

Unless you think that one person is responsible for you being in dire straits.

BISHOP

You think Nessa's responsible for you being in dire straits?

OLLIE

I think someone is responsible. Think a whole lotta someones is responsible. And I'm tired of those someone's thinking I don't see 'em; thinking I don't know my place and theirs; theirs relative to me.

BISHOP

It's all relative to you?

OLLIE

You live the life you live: it's all relative to you, ain't it?

Beat.

BISHOP

You in the habit of doing favors for folks, Ollie?

OLLIE

Well, obviously, that would depend on the favor and depend on the folks.

BISHOP

I need a kind of insurance.

OLLIE

What, like Allstate?

BISHOP

No, nigga, like against the worst parts of Nessa. I mean, I'm not afraid of her, I'm afraid of what she might do.

OLLIE

Oh... well... I can't imagine why.

BISHOP

Exactly.
So you'll do it?

OLLIE

I'd like to know what I'm agreeing to do before I agree to do it.

BISHOP

You and I both know that's not how this works. It's a game of trust and making bets based on that trust. I'm betting on you. Do you trust me, Ollie? Did you trust my father?

Beat.

OLLIE

Fine.

BISHOP

Good. Thought you might. You know how to sneak into places using the fire escapes, right?

OLLIE

Of course. You care to tell me what I'll be doing?

BISHOP

Yeah, but... not out here.

Let's go back 'round the back.

They head up the alley that they entered from.

As they're going,

BISHOP

You ever hear of disarmament?

And they're gone.

ZAIRE THE GOAT enters. He chills here for a couple seconds.

Then he exits to the wing again.

ALEXUS and the FURIES enter. Each holding cheap “Thank You for Coming” bags.

Just as they’re about to enter the building—The FURIES make it inside, but ALEXUS trails a little bit behind them—BISHOP enters.

Both he and ALEXUS stop in their tracks when they see one another.

MEG (OFF)

Alexus, you coming?

ALEXUS

I’ll be right up.

ALEC (OFF)

Ight, don’t take too long.

MEG (OFF)

You want us to wait on you?

TISHA (OFF)

Heifer, no we not, my Butter Pecan ice cream melting. She said she coming, now c’mon.

They’re gone.

BISHOP opens his arms wide.

BISHOP

Alexus...

ALEXUS

Do you want a hug?

BISHOP

(lowers his arms)

I guess not then.

ALEXUS

Point one for Bishop, you guess correct. What are you doing here?

BISHOP

It's good to see you.

ALEXUS

Miss me with the polite bullshit. I know you: a selfish asshole just like your father.

BISHOP

Why I gotta be all that?

ALEXUS

'Cause you're just like your father.

BISHOP

There's nothing you could say that would hurt me more.

ALEXUS

Please. There's nothing you want more than to be just like him. So what got you back here? Apollo sent you?

BISHOP

I have a mind of my own.

ALEXUS

That's good to know. Fish for an honest explanation in there.

BISHOP

I just wanted to see you. See her. Life is short.

ALEXUS

Mhm, mhm. Right. Except I'm not a child anymore so like I said before: miss me with the bullshit, why are you here?

BISHOP

I gave you my reason. Whether you believe me or not is up to you.

ALEXUS

Ah, deflecting accountability. If I didn't have LASIK, I might've mistook you for Ghost.

BISHOP

Alexus: I had to go away. You don't know what that shadow was like.

ALEXUS

People go on living when you not around, you know?

BISHOP

I can't change what happened then, I can only change what happens from here on out.

ALEXUS

And what exactly is that?

BISHOP

Trust me.

ALEXUS

Why should I trust you?

BISHOP

We're family.

ALEXUS

Nigga... I don't know if you know, but our mother just killed our father. I'ma need more than just "we're family."

BISHOP

Because I'm your brother. I was ducking under the table with you all those years. I was barricading the door right next to you all those years. Those things don't go away just 'cause I did.

ALEXUS

Alright, fine, come on then. We'll see if I can talk Nessa down.

BISHOP

I can't go in there.

ALEXUS

Then what the fuck is all this about?

BISHOP

It's really good to see you.

ALEXUS

Listen, Bishop, I'ma go braid a little girl's hair and—

BISHOP

What little girl?

ALEXUS

What difference does it make?

BISHOP

Is she anything like Iffie?

ALEXUS

Sure. She's kind and smart-mouth just like Iffie was. Or she's just, you know, a kid.

BISHOP

Cool, cool.
Well, I'ma go on then. Gotta ride, you know how it is.

ALEXUS

Whatever, man.

BISHOP

I'll be back, I promise.

ALEXUS

The thing about you and your father is that y'all don't keep y'all promises.

BISHOP

I'll keep this one.

ALEXUS

Just take care of yourself.
For yourself.
Personally, it don't make me no difference.

Just before she's gone, ALEXUS stops.

ALEXUS

You want me to tell her you're back?

BISHOP smiles and chuckles softly to himself.

BISHOP

Tell her. See how she reacts.

ALEXUS exits.

OLLIE enters from one of the alleys.

OLLIE

It's done.

BISHOP

Thank you.

OLLIE

Sure.

OLLIE heads toward the building.

BISHOP

Where are you going?

OLLIE

It's getting late. Time to have dinner with my mom.

BISHOP

What, do you have to set the table too?

OLLIE

(scoffs)

I wish we could sit at the table.

OLLIE exits to the building.

A slow clap from off.

A man in gang colors, GANG BANGER enters from the wing.

BISHOP

Where is all you niggas coming from?

GANG BANGER

Things move faster here than wherever you was. Baby Bishop back in the hood.

BISHOP

And who you is that you need to know?

GANG BANGER

It don't make you no nevermind who I am. Just know I know who you are.

BISHOP

You asking me to trust you? If so, I don't do too good at that.

GANG BANGER

Boy, your empty threats don't scare nobody. What you finally come back for?

BISHOP

A god asked me to do a thing my father failed to.

GANG BANGER

What's the thing?

BISHOP

Can't say. To speak evil would be to manifest it.

GANG BANGER

If a man traffics in evil, he need not fear it. Are you an evil man, Bishop?

BISHOP

That's the question. Let me ask you one: name me one evil man who doesn't think himself good.

GANG BANGER

All of them. In order for a man to be evil, he has to know he's doing evil; otherwise he's just ignorant. Blissfully, maybe, but ignorant all the same.

BISHOP

I think you're ignorant if you don't think choosing ignorance is a kind of evil.

GANG BANGER

I'm ignorant?

You wanna try that again?

Least I make decisions for myself.

You and your daddy neither had the balls enough to do that much.

NESSA (OFF)

He's where?

Doors slam on the inside of the project.

GANG BANGER

Well, would you look at that?

I think *you* have a choice to make.

GANG BANGER starts to retreat from BISHOP.

ALEC (OFF)

Nessa, why you slamming doors and everything?

MEG (OFF)

Yeah, is everything alright?

NESSA (OFF)

You'll never guess who's back.

TISHA (OFF)

Not this again. Don't tell me that nigga Ghost come back to life.

ALEXUS (OFF)

Might as well be.

ALEC (OFF)

Who it is, though?

ALEXUS (OFF)

If you coming, come on. She storming down already.

BISHOP steels himself in the down-left corner of the courtyard.

GANG BANGER doubles back.

GANG BANGER

Hey, Bishop. It's a lotta niggas not named you that's lookin' at her through the eye of revenge.

BISHOP

What's that got to do with me?

GANG BANGER

Maybe a lot, maybe nothing.

GANG BANGER exits.

NESSA emerges from the center building.

Both BISHOP and NESSA stop in their tracks when they see one another.

KARA and ALEXUS stand just behind NESSA.

The FURIES flank around them.

Lights shift to a red haze – all are frozen except for The FURIES.

THE FURIES

(*ALEC*): Reaping what he sows is rather grim

(*MEG*): But with nowhere left to go, the light he's following is dim

(*TISHA*): A devil-god sings a homily, a hymn. (*MEG*): Apollo!

(*ALEC*): The odds of salvation are slow if not slim.

(*MEG*): I know now that woe is not whim

(*ALEC*): Familicide came to the hood'n'den caught a second wind

(*TISHA*): But a fury could serve as both executioner and jury

MEG wields the same palm-flame as before and gets really into a vibe.

THE FURIES

(*MEG*): Let that thang sang! Let that thang sang!

(*ALEC*): Stop.

(*MEG*): Let that thang sang! Let that thang sang!

(*ALEC*): *Meg, stop!* Girl...

Lights back to normal.

Everyone resumes the scene as before.

NESSA

Where all you been all this time?

BISHOP

Around. What all you been up to?

NESSA

Nothing worth speaking.

BISHOP

That's not what I hear.

NESSA

Be careful what you hear but be more careful who you hear it from. How I could help you?

BISHOP

I just come back to see you.

NESSA

Ain't that nice? I don't believe you though.

BISHOP

Aw, you should trust me more than that.

NESSA

Should I? I don't even know that I know who you are.

BISHOP

Isn't that for the better? Magic in the mystery?

NESSA

Magic or sumn else. Probably depend on perspective.

BISHOP

And what's your perspective?

Beat.

TISHA

(*whispering*)

Nessa, girl wass—uh—wass the move here?

NESSA

Y'all go on. This ain't nothing. Just a woman talking to a boy. Face-to-face. Good-willing to good-willing.

ALEC

You sure?

TISHA

We could stay out here if you need.

KARA

Miss Nessa?

NESSA

Kara, go on.

KARA

Miss Nessa, just come on inside. It's safe inside. He can't bother us inside.

ALEXUS

It's not not safe out here.

KARA

It feels like it, though.

MEG

Or if you wanna stay, we could stay too.

NESSA

Kara, go on, I said. Y'all watch her.

KARA

I don't know who you are, sir, but don't hurt her. I need her.

NESSA

Kara!

BISHOP

(to KARA)

I wouldn't dream of it.

KARA hugs onto NESSA. NESSA sucks her teeth.

ALEC

I just got a bad—

NESSA quiets ALEC.

NESSA

Alexus, get her.

ALEXUS

Come on, Kara, let's go on and do these braids. You could braid my hair too. We could eat ice cream and watch TV. It's cozy inside.

NESSA weens her off and ALEXUS takes her upstairs, aided by the FURIES while KARA claws at her, reluctant to be pulled away.

BISHOP

You always do make a scene. Even when you're not the principal performer. It haunts you—the drama of it all—doesn't it?

NESSA

This place is practically scene-less when you and your father aren't around.

BISHOP

You think I look like him?

NESSA

I think you look too much like him.

BISHOP

Does that scare you?

NESSA

Hurts me more than it scares me.

BISHOP

I say I'm nothing like him.

NESSA

If I were so lucky.
What you come here for?

BISHOP

You know what I come here for.

NESSA

Apollo sent you?

BISHOP

I got a mind of my own. Could make decisions of my own.

NESSA

Don't let thoughts of vengeance move you somewhere you ain't got no business being.

BISHOP

I ain't worried. I'm right where I'm supposed to be.

BISHOP reveals a heretofore concealed handgun.
It's pointed down.

NESSA

You know what's sad? I always had hopes we would get back to being a normal mother and son. The way we were before the world came down on us. But I'm disappointed Bishop.

BISHOP

About what?

NESSA

That you don't know me well enough to know that I know exactly who you are.

NESSA quick-draws her own gun and shoots in a single motion. It doesn't fire. She tries again and again, nothing. She looks into the chamber.

BISHOP

You're out. A favor from a friend.

NESSA

That's it, then?

BISHOP

Afraid so.

NESSA tosses her gun with a soft laugh.

BISHOP

What?

NESSA

You filling out his jacket, you after his crown: you grew up to be just like Ghost after all. And against all my damndest efforts.

(rolls her eyes)

And here I am loving you in spite of myself. I'm almost proud you done become a man. Almost got a faith that you'll figure your way in the world.

BISHOP

I'm doing you a favor here, Ma.

NESSA

Just do it.

BISHOP

I hate to do it. I just—it's niggas out here what wanna see you suffer and that ain't no way to live.

NESSA

That's the way I been living all my life Bishop, don't bother with no excuse, just do it.

BISHOP

Hear me out, Ma, I don't hate you.

NESSA

Your father wouldn't have explained himself. He had no love for anyone; not me, not Iffie, not Alexis, and not you. So for all the ways that he was the worst kind of man. At least he was the kind of man who could finish what he started.

BISHOP fires and NESSA falls to where Ghost's memorial once was.

BISHOP

And yet here I am. Finishing what he couldn't.
No more mourning on Monday mornings, for you ma, this is a merciful act.

She smiles through a grill of blood—mocking him. She licks her teeth and then passes on.

BISHOP crosses to her, closes her eyes, and lays her down. He meditates over her body.

He looks up at the sky.

A shadow crosses the entire complex, eclipsing the light when it does.

BISHOP

Shit, is that star—? It is. It's getting closer... Fuck.

Lights to black.

End of Act III

ACT IV

post-“LIBATION BEARERS”

or

/ a second funerary service /

² Immediately following Act IV, if possible, there can be an intermission in earnest that features a group meal. This idea is further explored in *Appendix A: Notes on a Meal*

ACT IV

-

an intermission

This second funerary service is less attended than the first. KARA and The FURIES stand above the barren, unfinished wood box.

The scene is set stage left.

Each woman shovels dirt atop the casket laid flat.

There's no singing, no insignia, no signs or written condolences.

KARA takes great pains to not look at anyone. Even when MEG looks up, inviting her.

In time, ALEC, MEG, and TISHA leave KARA to mourn.

Alone, KARA sits next to the casket. She places her hand on the lid, buried beneath layers of dirt and sits with Nessa.

KARA

I know...

No response.

KARA

I know...

She knows no one is gonna call a response. She lays her head on the lid of the casket.

MEG enters with a spare candle in a stand and places it on the foot of the casket.

MEG

Just blow it out when you done here.

MEG smiles softly, consoling KARA. Then exits.

ZAIRE THE GOAT creeps into the scene from the wing stage right.

OLLIE sneaks in behind him, brooding with a switchblade.

He lunges for ZAIRE — and — all lights down except for the candle and a soft spot on KARA.

We hear the goat cry and then its body being dragged off.

KARA meditates over the dead. All light down except for the candle.

A WOMAN'S VOICE

(spoken over the god-mic)

Spread the blood of beasts over the doors of the House of Atreus.
Let the men drink of it. A new order shall soon come.

KARA stands up. She walks down and towers over the candle. The candlelight creates shadows across her face. She bends down and blows the flame of the candle out.

Complete darkness.

Then,

tinfoil crinkles.

ALEC

You hear that crinkling?

TISHA

(mouth full)

... No.

Crinkling again.

ALEC

I know I hear some crinkling.

ALEC turns on a lantern. TISHA is eating food from tinfoil wrapping.

MEG

Tisha!

TISHA

What?

ALEC

Where you get that tinfoil from?

TISHA

Ollie and them boys was having a cookout. They made this, like... jerk goat? And I was suspicious, but it's good forreal. They got sorrel, too.

MEG

A cookout?

ALEC

But Nessa just died.

TISHA

You ain't got to tell me, my shoulder still sore from carrying that casket. Nessa was a lot of things but light?—she was not.

ALEC

It's a damn shame.

MEG

The lady just died and they out there eating and-and-and having a good time and shit.

Beat.

ALEC

But where you said it was at, though?

MEG

Word, 'cause if it's close by, it just make sense if we grab a plate.

ALEC

That's not disrespectful, that's just resourceful, Nessa would want us to be resourceful.

TISHA

(still sucking on the goat bones)

It's right there 'round the corner.

ALEC

Bishop out there?

TISHA

I ain't seen him.

MEG

Mm, lucky for him.

TISHA

They said Apollo might swing by, though.

MEG

Who?

ALEC

I know you ain't said who I think you said.

TISHA

I said what I said: Apollo.

ALEC

I wish the fuck he would. He'd be a dead motherfucker I tell you that.

ALEC heads toward the house.

MEG

So you not going?

ALEC

No, I'm going...

ALEC exits and reenters with a Louisville Slugger.

ALEC

... I just hope Apollo not there for his sake.

MEG and ALEC beeline for the cookout.

MEG

Ight, girl, we'll see you.

TISHA

See you.

Lights down.

End of Act IV

ACT V

“THE EUMENIDES”

or

/ ~~deus ex machina~~
god + the machine /

ACT V

A Dark before Dawn.

BISHOP (OFF)

Apollo?

APOLLO (OFF)

Bishop. You gotta kill that little girl, Bishop.

BISHOP (OFF)

I can't go back there.

APOLLO (OFF)

It's the only way you save yourself.

As lights rise, the sky is right on the eve of
daybreak—lights skew a reddish pink to open.

The FURIES are where they were at the top of
Act III, except this time they're all eating from
tinfoil.

MEG

Girl, you wasn't lying, this goat is good as hell.

ALEC

And it's *fresh*!

PIANO MAN enters from the wing. He's still
wearing the baby bjorn but it's empty.

He's been crying.

PIANO MAN

Hey, y'all.

He sniffles.

They keep eating.

PIANO MAN

I'm sorry for bothering y'all, but... y'all seen Zaire around here?

Something dawns on them and they slowly move
so that they're holding the tinfoil containers

behind their backs,

ALEC
Nahhhhh.

MEG
Nope-Nope-Nope.

TISHA
I ain't seen him, naw.

PIANO MAN
It's crazy. I just don't know where he went. I know I be ribbing y'all sometimes, but y'all was always nice to Zaire so I wanted to thank y'all for that.

ALEC
Shit, you gon' be okay, Piano Man?

PIANO MAN
That goat was my best friend in the world.

TISHA
Damn, that's sad / old man.

MEG
That's *beau-ti-ful*. Tisha just pronounce it wrong.

PIANO MAN
What y'all think the chances of him coming back?

ALEC sucks on something in her teeth.

PIANO MAN
Wait, is y'all eating something?

MEG
No! Now, Piano Man, we wouldn't eat nothing in your face, that's rude.
(*sotto voice to ALEC*)
Stop it!

PIANO MAN
Yeah, y'all probably right. I should probably give myself the space to mourn.

ALEC
How, um... if you'll excuse me asking, how did Zaire get lost?

TISHA
I thought you had him in the...

PIANO MAN
Yeah, but I took him out when he was shitting. So I could clean it.

MEG

Oh yeah.

PIANO MAN

Then I realized I should probably take a shower. Must've left the door open and couldn't hear him get out.

ALEC

Well, we're sorry.

PIANO MAN

It ain't y'all fault. I guess it ain't nobody fault.

PIANO MAN starts to exit.

MEG

(thinking he's gone)

I think I got a piece stuck in my molar. You got floss?

TISHA

(grit teeth)

Shutup, he—!

PIANO MAN

A piece of what?

MEG

Nothing, you go 'head on, I'm sure you'll find him.

TISHA

Yeah, rattle a can or something, don't goats like cans?

PIANO MAN

Yeah, Zaire liked cans...

PIANO MAN picks up a can nearby, drops some change in and rattles it.

GANG BANGER (OFF)

Man, stop begging!

PIANO MAN

Shut the fuck up, ain't nobody begging! I'm looking for my goat!

PIANO MAN exits.

TISHA

Ight, y'all, where that nigga Bishop at, anyway?

ALEC

Ran.

TISHA

Man, if that boy ain't 'bout a punk.

MEG

That boy and his dad'll both do some dirt and duck. Bobbing and weaving by way of leaving. Bet you he be surprised to see us waiting on him when he get back though.

ALEC

That's if he come back.

TISHA

He gon' come back. He a man and his pride is at stake.

MEG

Either he come back or we'll go on after him.

ALEC

Where's Lexus and Kara?

MEG

Greenwood. Sitting with Nessa. 'Lexus went to meet her out there.

ALEC

Should we have gon' with them?

TISHA

I mean, nawh, right? Like who dies at a cemetery?

Just then:

CHORUS OF KIDS

*I know / (I know)
it's a long way down (way down)
to the bottom
of the river Jordan.
I can't catch my breath
but Nazareth: if God got us, then we gon' be—*

MEG

Don't speak so soon.

ALEC

You think?

TISHA

Fee and Tavis was out there with them, they wouldn't let nothing happen to those girls. This just another day, another undue dead.

Over-top the mourning song, they chorally
reflect:

The song fades and eventually drops out from
under their reverie.

THE FURIES

(*ALL*): Twice upon a time there was a boy who died.

(*TISHA*): Bishop better run 'cause I'll split his O-P;

(*TISHA*): make a bish out the man and a man outta me.

(*MEG*): If that's the way that it is, that's the way it gotta be.

(*ALEC*): Do you feel lucky, punk? A junk lottery.

(*MEG*): Ghost and the goat both slain.

(*ALEC*): Dead an old order; a new campaign.

(*TISHA*): Becky and her husband breaching at the border,

(*MEG*): to flip flipped bricks to a brick and mortar.

(*ALEC*): They bought it for a dime, but gon' sell it for a quarter

(*TISHA*): Foresight as short as your bob, but my fuse is shorter.

(*ALEC*): Under duress, pressed by two circumstances

(*TISHA*): Yes, you've stressed and repressed my chances

(*MEG*): I showed dressed to impress but the dance-is over,

(*ALEC*): I'm awash in blood: drenched in red like lady Carrie and

(*TISHA*): aim at me all you want, but just know that these ladies carrying, so

(*ALEC*): How you fed on me,

(*MEG*): wished dead on me,

(*TISHA*): then come with the overhead on me?

(*TISHA*): Broke bread on me,

(*MEG*): put lead on me,

(*ALEC*): then preach bullshit: "Don't Tread on Me"?

(*MEG*): When you the one that's been trampling,

(*TISHA*): sampling without citing.

(*ALEC*): You must be over ya underdogs with the over-under you're overwriting

(*TISHA*): So miss me, the meek, with your merriment and mirth

(*MEG*): And ya promise: in the next life, I'll inherit the earth

(*TISHA*): Fuck you and ya slogan, you end up what you owe

(*ALEC*): N.W.A. meets N.W.O.

(*MEG*): A new world order: Hollywood Hogan

(*ALEC*): Tell me: what's the worth of a wealth I'm a rogue in

(*MEG*): You bet' not get the wrong impression: Paul Gauguin

(*TISHA*): I'll spill your paint on a concrete canvas

(*ALEC*): Ungentle with your mental;

(*TISHA*): Spread your hippocampus on my avocado toast

(*MEG*): Your bold bravado boasts don't move me.

(*ALEC*): Un-great men end up in the grotto, ghosts of a life shit-lived

(*MEG*): Chasing big wigs

(*TISHA*): And you don't got the spine or the neck support

(*ALEC*): You ran from all the fights that you begged to fought

(*MEG*): That's a problem with tenses, I'm tensing up

(*TISHA*): Truly

(*ALEC*): You ever seen a fury going off unruly

(*TISHA*): The hood don't want to, but it's 'bout to

(*ALEC*): —one of us—

(*MEG*): Let that thang sang, let that thang sang!

(*ALEC*): Meg.

(*MEG*): Let that thang sang, let that thang sang!

(*TISHA*): Meg, stop.

(*MEG*): Let that thang sang, let that thang sang!

(*ALEC + TISHA*): Meg.

(*MEG*): Let that thang sang, let that thang sang!

(*ALEC + TISHA*): Meg, stop!

The noise of the star getting closer. They look up
at it.

TISHA

That thang singing.

ALEC

That must be your backing track, huh, Meg?

MEG

Don't you wish that on me.

KARA enters.

ALEC

Y'all back already?

KARA

I'm back. Alexis ran by the store to pick up some extra things for Fee and Tavis.

TISHA

Ight well you go on in the house until she gets back.

KARA

Ok.

KARA sulks as she heads toward the house.

MEG

You look down, Kara, what's wrong?

TISHA

(sotto; to MEG)

Why? Why do you wanna be friends with this girl so damn bad?

KARA

I just... You know about my hands, right?

MEG

Sure. You been putting the Palmer's on 'em?

KARA

Yeah, I been using the cocoa butter you gave me.

MEG

But?

KARA

But they're... doing it more now? Like they're oozing more?

ALEC

You mean your hands are not only oozing kerosene gas, they are oozing kerosene gas more profusely than they ever have before?

KARA

Whatever they do, they're doing more of it now.

MEG

Is that it? Maybe it's because of the grief.

KARA

They also get really hot now.

MEG

Like how hot?

KARA

Like so hot I think they're gonna catch on fire. Which is not possible, right? That's not possible.

MEG looks at TISHA who is annoyed by the implication.

TISHA

No, no. I fuckin' refuse. You will not make me—no. That child ain't nothing like us.

MEG

I mean, we don't know.

KARA

What? What don't you know?

MEG

And wouldn't it kinda make sense?

ALEC

She did just kinda show up.

TISHA

No, y'all, it is im – poss – i – ble.

ALEXUS enters.

ALEXUS

What's impossible?

TISHA

Nothing.

ALEC

How you doing 'Lexus?

ALEXUS

I feel 'bout her like I told her I felt about Ghost. Whatever love I held for her, they was both dead to me a long time ago.

MEG

Okay. But if you need anything.

ALEXUS

I'm good. Just like her to leave me with a responsibility.

KARA

Okay, okay, uh... ow.

ALEXUS

I didn't say I don't enjoy the responsibility—okay I don't enjoy the responsibility—but I enjoy the fun parts. You're like getting back something I lost in a past life. That make sense?

KARA

No.

ALEXUS

Well it will when you get older so shut up. Come on so you can carry this stew so Fee and Tavis could get things up and running.

KARA and ALEXUS exit to the house.

ALEC

There can't be a fourth fury, can there?

TISHA

Okay, well, I didn't think there could be a third.

MEG

Yeah, well, there is though, so fuck you.

ALEC

I mean, she's definitely green, right? I mean, she's still a child.

TISHA

She's not green, she's not anything. She's just a brolic fuckin' child.

KARA exits carrying the stew pot.

MEG

You need some help with that?

KARA

Nah, I got it.

She exits to the wing still carrying the pot.

ALEC points at her like 'see'?

TISHA

Don't you dare point at her, heifer, I could see! I got eyes. Thank you.

ALEC

I just think maybe let's not close off to the possibility.

TISHA

Well, it's too late. I'm closed like the captioning on your TV. I'm closed like Blockbusters and Radio Shack. I'm closed like the wallet of your mama when you say you want McDonalds. I am *closed*.

MEG

Were you this obstinate when you found out I was gonna be a fury?

TISHA

Yes! Because I don't like you either!

MEG

Except you love me.

TISHA

Why do you think that? What have I done to make you think that?

MEG

Remember that time I was gonna get hit by that car and you pushed me out the way?

At the periphery, GANG BANGER bickers
unintelligibly with someone else who remains
unseen to us.

TISHA

Because you was wearing my jacket, Meg. I didn't wanna have to explain no dried blood stains to everybody at the laundry.

MEG

Yeah, whatever.

GANG BANGER enters fully.

GANG BANGER

Good evening.

ALEC

How can we help you?

GANG MEMBER

You all is who they call the Furies, right?

TISHA

Yes, nigga, hurry up and say your piece.

GANG MEMBER

I just come 'cause I know y'all got beefs and the means to squash 'em.

TISHA

Nigga, don't make me snatch the thought from outcha brain.

ALEC

What part of hurry up do you not understand?

GANG MEMBER

Ok. I hear Apollo's coming, forreal this time. East-way, down that way.

The FURIES storm off in the direction GANG
BANGER shows them.

GANG BANGER

(sotto to the person off)

Alright, it's done. I don't want no more parts of this.

GANG BANGER exits up one of the alleys.

With the FURIES gone, BISHOP enters from the
same wing that BANGER entered from.

Wielding a blade, he approaches the building.

The FURIES reenter at the edge of the scene,
their arms crossed.

ALEC

How dumb do you think we are?

BISHOP quickly hides the blade.

BISHOP

Dumb? I don't think you're dumb.

MEG

Yeah, Bishop, you think we're dumb.

BISHOP

I don't know what you're—

TISHA

You thought we would be so stolen to our rage for Apollo that we would run away while you
waltz on back to the House, back for Alexis.

MEG

Or back for Kara.

BISHOP

I would never do anything to them. That little girl ain't did nothing to me and Alexis is my sister.

ALEC

I seem to remember you telling that little girl that you wouldn't dream of doing no harm to Nessa.

MEG

And yet this morning, I seen her and Alexis coming back from Greenwood, out there looking over Nessa's grave.

BISHOP

It don't look good, but y'all is passing judgments on circumstances y'all don't understand.

ALEC

You got 'bout ten seconds to make us understand.

TISHA

Else we'll learn you a thing or two.

BISHOP

So you all go after people who break their oaths, right?

MEG

That's right.

BISHOP

Then tell me: what oath did I break?

TISHA

Nigga the oath of not killing your mother, what the fuck?

ALEC

And I thought his Daddy was dumb...

BISHOP

Ok but what if I made an extrafamilial oath? A divine oath that supersedes even the blood-bond of family?

TISHA

Yeah, that's cute, but we not buying it.

ALEC

You oughta know an oath with Apollo ain't worth so much here.

TISHA takes out and slides on a set of brass
knuckles.

MEG

Tisha! When did you get brass knuckles?

TISHA

Don't you mind when I got 'em, girl, I'm finna lose 'em in this nigga face.

BISHOP

No, please! A chance to state my case, that's all.

...

... a tribunal.

ALEC

A tribunal? You want to surrender your fate to us?

BISHOP

As if it's not surrendered to you already?

MEG

There's no altering or amending a tribunal decision, you know that?

BISHOP

I know that.

MEG

And you're sure you want to do this?

BISHOP

I'm sure.

ALEC

So be it.

A small transition to:

THE FURIES IN FORM

(a tribunal)

—

(Lights go completely out for a moment and everyone sits in the darkness.)

When they come back up, they are a deeper shade of the color red teased in ACT III.

The look of the FURIES has shifted as well: they are all clad in glowing red garments and the color shines brightest like fire from their hands.

The brood over and around BISHOP who, ironically, stands trial before them while down on his knees.

The tribunal has been assumed. And the FURIES shall, in fact, serve as judge, jury, and executioner.)

ALEC

Tribunal has been assumed.
Alec,

MEG

Meg,

TISHA

And Tisha,

ALEC

Known now as the Furies.
Shall act as judge, jury, and
executioner. Do you
understand this?

BISHOP

I understand this.

ALEC

Very Well.

MEG

We had our order, Bishop.

ALEC

Ghost is King

BISHOP

Until Bishop is born!

ALEC

Then Nessa is King.

TISHA

But Nessa was killed.

BISHOP

So I could be born again; so I could rise!

MEG

Rise to what?

BISHOP

To the crown, to the occasion of my blood, my blood right. My inheritance.

TISHA

The Blood of
Ascendancy isn't beat
blood. It's bled-blood.

MEG

And we don't have all the
time in the world. So I
suggest you formally make
your case quickly, Bishop:
selected son of the House of
Atreus.

BISHOP

It's *not* bled-blood, it's red blood like Atreus, red blood like Ghost, red blood
like Bishop got, red blood like most everyone but, like, my blood got
kingdoms and divinations and creeds. I'm at the mercy of something bigger
than me. The way that great men are wont to be. I can't help the things I do.

ALEC

Refuted.

Your lack of moral fortitude
doesn't absolve you of the
things you've done.
This will be noted.

*(As if a gash in the air itself, a single neon light like a tally mark, shines **red**
against the **stage left building**.)*

TISHA

Continue on, make
your case.

BISHOP

I protected her against other, potentially worse people and perils. Contrary to what I may have done, I made sure no one else brought harm to her; my mother.

I'll offer you that I received instruction from a god and fought that instruction. I defied the will of a god as long as I did not for myself, but out of filial devotion.

She could have been dead long sooner if not for my whispering in the ears of the right men at the right times at the edges of this hood.

MEG

Maintained.

You granted her time she
otherwise may not have had.
This will be noted.

*(Again, as if a gash in the air itself, a single neon light like a tally mark, shines but this time **gold** against the **stage right building**.)*

BISHOP

My interference notwithstanding, let the record show that Nessa, my mother, intended to kill me—she shot to kill me first—before I made any attempts on her life. If she'd succeeded, I wouldn't be here at all. I wouldn't be alive at all. Let alone defendant at a tribunal.

MEG

Maintained.

The lineage of violence in
The House of Atreus,
though primarily patrilineal,
does not escape Nessa the
deceased, nor her daughters
behind her.
This will be noted.

*(An additional **gold** tally mark against the backdrop of the **building stage right**.)*

BISHOP

If my action was done misguided by a god, it was in hopes for progress toward a better future. What I was killing was not Nessa as mother, but Nessa as a figure of the past. An inheritor of those lineages you just spoke of—was the advice given to me sound? I won't speak to that. But given that advice, I did the best I could do. Not for my own material gain, but for the betterment of our community.

ALEC

Refuted.

Considering your extended
absence from the
community you allege to
want betterment for and the
tenuous nature of your
remaining familial ties here,
I read your defense as
disingenuous; damn near
downright deceitful.
This will be noted.

*(As if a gash in the air itself, a second neon light like a tally mark, shines **red**
against the **stage left building**.)*

MEG

This next defense
will determine
your fate, so I
advise you defend
carefully, young
Bishop.

BISHOP

I'm—like you, like my father, like Nessa, like Alexis, like Ollie,—a product of circumstance. I am not afforded the freedoms of choice or options. I gauge the cards given to me and play the best possible hand of them. Is this necessarily *the* best hand? No. Is this the hand I'm most proud to have played? No. But it is easily the most logical and most moral hand I could play given the cards that I was given. I am but a man. Equal parts at the mercy of gods and at the mercy of streets.

ALEC

Refuted.

You double down on a
feeble defense. Your
departure and continued
absence speaks to me of a
singular potential afforded to
you to escape the
circumstance you say we're
all subject to. That you
returned at all suggests
premeditation and an active
pursuit of an unnecessary
violence.
This will be noted.

*(As if a gash in the air itself, a third neon light like a tally mark, shines **red**
against the **stage left building**.)*

TISHA

The Tribunal has
reached her verdict.
Does the defendant
dare hear his fate?

BISHOP

I can tell the verdict.

MEG

In which case, Bishop –
selected son of the House of
Atreus, your fate has been
decided and that decision
has been made clear you.

ALEC

We act not in the service of
vengeance but in the service
of rightful consequence
come to pass.

TISHA

And seeing as how
this is the conclusion
of this tribunal called,
come to pass it shall.

BISHOP

If for no other reason than my own absolution, let it be spoken before the
Furies that I maintain remorse for the things I've done.

TISHA

Yeah, yeah, sure it's
been noted.

The FURIES crowd around BISHOP, a grand gesture toward executing the man

*But as soon as they get close enough perform the execution, he unveils a heretofore hidden
blade and slices each of the FURIES in the face in sequence.*

One, Two, and Three Furies all collapse to the ground, lifeless.)

BISHOP

Let this be the grounds of my inheritance: my fidelity to the wills of the
gods. I ask on those gods, now, confer to me what is mine by blood-right.

*The whole project rattles and shakes, the grounds are rumbling, light from the sky flickers
gently-contrasting against the red light of the Furies' powers,*

the clouds part above BISHOP with great fanfare, then...

*Ghost's old beanie from way back when—the one that Nessa caught all those dead ago—
that hat, that crown,*

d

e

s

c

e

n

d

s

from the splitting sky

*as BISHOP basks in the moment.
When the hat gets close enough, he
reaches out and pulls it onto his head.*

*Immediately, he starts screaming
profusely and clawing at the cap but—
failing to remove Ghost's hat—he
begins bleeding from the crown of his
head.*

*Blood oozes until it covers his entire
face.*

*He falls into shock and writhes until he
passes out.)*

Lights down as the tribunal has ceased.

A moment in the dark.

When lights come back up, they've returned to
normal and the scene resumes:

bodies remain downed in the same places, but
The FURIES are back to their regular garb.

APOLLO enters among the carnage.

APOLLO

(bickering with someone offstage)

Who say I can't come to the hood? Man, do you know who I am; what my name is? Say it if
you know it, if you don't know it, you better learn it: Apollo, nigga. Pulling up to the hood a
whole ass god nigga. fuck outta here with some: "you can't come to the hood." Who gon'
stop me? You don't know I got that big man Baby Bishop under my thumb? C'mon now.
Matter fact, why don't I go get Bishop and...

(he notices the carnage;

♫ BISHOP's place among it)

...

...

... *motherfucker.*

He crosses to BISHOP.

APOLLO

I give you one job to do, one job, you dumb, dense, goat-dick motherfucker.

APOLLO removes the beanie and tosses it onto the ground as he drags BISHOP around to the back of the building.

Beat.

OLLIE enters. Blood on his clothes. He sees all the bodies.

Then he spots Ghost's hat. He steps over the bodies of the Furies to get to it.

He picks it up and covets it. Grips it tightly, with his chest out—the hat still dripping drops of BISHOP's blood—he walks into the center building of the project.

PIANO MAN enters. He's clutching a painted portrait of Zaire the Goat. He sings the mourning song.

PIANO MAN

I know (I know)

it's a long way down (way down)

to the bottom

of the river Jordan.

I can't catch my breath

but Nazareth: if God got us, then we gon' be—

The star screeches.

PIANO MAN flinches.

PIANO MAN

What the fuck? That star gon' hit the fuckin'—?

(to the portrait)

I might be joining you sooner than we thought buddy.
Save a cigar for me.

PIANO MAN exits in the direction of the
cemetery.

The FURIES stir.

Gradually, they all get up. They're holding their
faces where they were slashed.

Where there should be wounds, there aren't any.
Little baby band-aids in their stead.

ALEC

Ow-ugh.

MEG

Did that nigga slash my face?

TISHA

My fucking sinuses, shit! I got a sensitive sinus! Done fucked up my fuckin'—now, I'ma
have to get Nasonex. Do you know how much Nasonex cost at the fucking pharmacy??

ALEC

Do you really need it?

TISHA

Yeah, I fuckin' need it! Did you not see me get slashed across the face?

MEG

Okay, heifer, calm down, we all got slashed across the face.

ALEC

Ight y'all come on, then, let's go quick. Then when we get back, we getting that nigga
Bishop. Ending that patrilineal line for good.

The FURIES exit.

Beat.

OLLIE enters from the project, still covered in
blood, still clutching Ghost's hat.

OLLIE

If I could just get to him. If I could just be close to him.

He starts in one direction. Then he hears,

TISHA (OFF)

Gotta go all the way to the pharmacy to get some damn Nasonex. You know how mad I am?

Then he pivots to head the other direction.

BISHOP, still woozy, stumbles from the alley.

BISHOP

Apollo come on, let's...

... we gotta...

... let's... we... leave... Apollo?

APOLLO enters behind him.

APOLLO

Man, that's some real punk shit, Bishop. You seeming chickenshit in a way your Daddy never did, boy.

BISHOP

My father's... hat; never made him
bleed... from his fuckin' skull!

OLLIE, unbeknownst to the men, gawks at this.

He drops the hat.

APOLLO

Little boy, what are you doing here?

OLLIE

What are y'all dong? Cut me in.

APOLLO

Cut who in? Little boy I don't got time for this.

BISHOP

Apollo, let's go, before the Furies—

OLLIE

Are y'all worried 'bout the Furies? I heard them go to the pharmacy. They'll be away a while.

APOLLO

They're not inside the building?

OLLIE

Naw, I heard them going that way.

APOLLO

Bishop, if they're gone this is our best chance.

OLLIE

Are you Apollo?

APOLLO

(he hella annoyed)

Oh My God...

OLLIE

I sense you got no want for me now, but you'll have a need for me later. I know how you work.

APOLLO

Maybe, in which case, I'll see you later, nigga. Good.—Bye.

BISHOP

Ollie, what are you doing here?

OLLIE

I helped you. I helped you and now I have to be a part of what you're doing. I killed the goat. They said that would make me like them, that I could run with them.

BISHOP

That's them, Ollie, I never told you to kill a goat.

OLLIE

But it's all the same, I'm man enough to run with the men now. I could run with y'all now.

BISHOP

Ollie, no you can't, go inside.

OLLIE

I did what you asked me to. I emptied all her bullets out of all her guns.

BISHOP

And that was really, really great of you. If you hadn't, I'd be dead right now. I owe you my life and I thank you. Now goodbye, Ollie, please.

APOLLO

Woah. Woah. I thought it was bad enough your life was at the mercy of your mother, but your life was at the mercy of a child?

OLLIE

But Bishop, we're bonded. I'm Ghost's godson!

BISHOP

No, the fuck you're not! He didn't fuckin' know you.

If he were alive right now, he couldn't tell you from Carter who died last week from the next little nigga he would get a favor out of. You meant *nothing* to him, do you understand me?

Now, go upstairs.

OLLIE

I'm still not going.

APOLLO

Okay, this has gone on long enough. Little boy, you take my advice. Or I will personally kill you and your mother. If you know I'm Apollo, you know I'm not above doing that. You go inside, you go upstairs, you lock your front door, you eat an early dinner ducked behind your mother's bed and you don't come out for anything, do you understand me?

OLLIE nods.

APOLLO

Good. Now go.

OLLIE runs into the center building.

APOLLO

It's now or never, Bishop.

BISHOP

Alexus is in there with her.

APOLLO

This curse of suffering has been on your family for generations and you're worried about upsetting your sister? You know who was lost to that curse, Bishop? Your other sister. And that little girl in that house is trying to take her place.

BISHOP

She's just trying to make a life.

APOLLO

She is trying to take Iphigenia's place. Bishop.

BISHOP

... Could we make it fast?

APOLLO

Of course we could.

They enter the center building.

ALEXUS (OFF)

Bishop, what are you doing here?

BISHOP (OFF)

Move Alexis.

ALEXUS (OFF)

Is that Apollo, why is Apollo with you?

No, Bishop, stop!

BISHOP (OFF)

Alexus, let go of me.

ALEXUS (OFF)

Fucking ow!

BISHOP (OFF)

Apollo!

APOLLO (OFF)

So my hand slipped. Sue me.

KARA (OFF)

Ow-ugh! Get off!

They emerge from the project. BISHOP is dragging KARA, wielding the blade he used on the FURIES.

APOLLO is holding ALEXUS away from the two of them.

TISHA (OFF)

No, girl, you know I had to get the last Butter Pecan, wasn't no way I was—

The FURIES enter and see the scene.

TISHA drops her head and sucks her teeth, mid-sentence.

ALEC

Now, if these ain't bout the two most fool niggas I ever seen in my life.

BISHOP

This ain't got nothing to do with you. Stay away.

MEG

Now, that's the dumbest shit you ever said to me. Bishop, even if you wasn't fixing to kill the two people we swore to protect, do you not remember—mere moments ago—slashing a bish across her face?

TISHA

Yeah, I had to buy Nasonex messing with your ass.

TISHA reaches into the bag and sprays a spritz up her nose.

APOLLO

I know we don't see eye to eye, but this is for the better good.

TISHA does that thing where she's so mad she can't say words.

TISHA

ach – ch – pffffff – oooo – I could – mm – nigga, I could – oooo.

ALEXUS

What's happening? Something feels different.

BISHOP

Okay, y'all are getting hot and I've seen that look before, and if we could just—

BISHOP freezes mid-sentence. As do ALEXUS and KARA.

Lights shift to red.

Only the FURIES and APOLLO can speak/move/etc.

APOLLO

Fine, I get it. The Furies in their form. The god and the god-adjacent. So what, you're gonna make me defend myself in a tribunal?

TISHA

Nah, nigga, we been reached a verdict on you.

APOLLO

And pray tell: on what basis did you reach this verdict?

ALEC

You done masterminded this whole shit. All this suffering, come down from you.

APOLLO

Me? A mastermind? While my mind is 100% masterful, I will grant you that. I'm disheartened by your lack of trust in my morals. Like:

Ok. Sure, I told a man to sacrifice his daughter for the well-being of his hood and his family—when really, I was just bored. And then I told him to return to that hood to kill his wife, and then when that failed, I went to his son and told that son to come back and kill his mother and then, when I discovered there was a new child, I told him to kill her as well.

But morally? Like, morally speaking? I was just making conversation. Like, if I tell people to do things and they're more persuaded to do them because I'm a god or whatever, that's on them. I can't be held responsible for that.

ALEC

Refuted.

APOLLO

Oh, fuck you "refuted"!

*Again, as if a gash in the air itself, a single neon light
like a tally mark, shines red against the stage left
building.*

TISHA

Would you look at that: your one and only strike 'cause Tisha's on her last nerve.

APOLLO

Man, get the fuck out my face.

APOLLO mashes her face.

ALEC

You ain't gon' be out here just mashing faces.

APOLLO mashes her face.

MEG

Ight, that's the last face you gon'—

APOLLO mashes her face.

APOLLO

Ok, I'm over this. Need I remind you that I'm a god?

(he extends an arm, trying to conjure something)

Argh!

(he fails)

What the?

The star rattles above, louder than it's ever been.

APOLLO

What's that star doing? Why can't I use any of my powers?

TISHA

Huh. Looks like you're a normal nigga to me.

The FURIES jump on APOLLO. It's like a mosh pit except to the death. And the only one in danger is APOLLO. So more like a jumping. It's a jumping. They're jumping APOLLO.

They rip him limb from limb and beat his torso with the extremities.

They get tired.

TISHA

Whew, now onto that nigga Bishop.

They try to use their powers on BISHOP.

Their powers fail.

ALEC

What?

MEG

I think it's the star.

A WOMAN'S VOICE (OFF)

His wrongs onto the house are not yours to right.

TISHA

Okay, Miss Thang, then whose is it?

A WOMAN'S VOICE (OFF)

The girl's.

TISHA

The girl's?

They look over to KARA, who's keeping to herself, nursing a flame.

MEG

How is she moving? This is the Furies in Form-space.

ALEC /MEG

Ooohhhh...

TISHA

No! No! Goddammit, no! Does this mean I'ma have to start hanging out with her?

Lights shift back to normal.

Everyone else resumes.

BISHOP

--calm down and talk everything out.

(he sees APOLLO's body)

Oh no.

He tries to run, but The Furies grab him.

The star sounds closer still. ALEXUS is awestruck.

ALEC

Alexus?

ALEXUS

I'm here.

ALEC

You go in the house and get everything still in there that belong to either Ghost or Bishop.

ALEXUS

On it.

She runs into the center building.

BISHOP

Are y'all gonna kill me?

ALEC

We wish.

MEG

But it seems like that honor goes to someone else.

Who?

BISHOP

The FURIES all look at KARA.

Oh, come on.

BISHOP

They disarm BISHOP of his blade and they hand it to KARA. She drops the blade on the ground.

The FURIES hold BISHOP down while remaining standing; they stand on his wrists and ankles.

All the while, KARA towers over his torso.

The FURIES form a wall that we can't really see behind.

This is for Nessa.

KARA

KARA wields her flame and hovers it over BISHOP's face.

He screams in agony as he's burned, burned away; evaporating into the history of the hood.

As BISHOP continues to scream, TISHA fishes in her plastic bag.

I just remembered!

TISHA

(she takes out her pint)

Oh shit.

What?

MEG

Done melted my Butter Pecan. This was the last one too.

TISHA

I mean, if you not gon' eat it...

MEG

TISHA

I'm gon' eat it, calm down Meg, witcho hungry ass.

MEG

Still. Lemme get some though.

TISHA

Fine, then, damn here.

ALEC swoops in and has some too.

ALEC

Y'all not gon' be passing this back and forth without me getting none.

TISHA

Oh my God, Alec! It's barely any left!

ALEC

You shoulda got more then.

TISHA

I said it's the last one, are you thick?

TISHA sucks her teeth and finishes her ice cream.

KARA moves from BISHOP, she's done. He's lowkey an ashen heap.

ALEXUS comes out of the project with a garbage bag full of clothes.

ALEC

Is that everything?

ALEXUS

That's everything.
Jesus, what happened to Bishop?

MEG

Rightful consequence.

ALEXUS

I mean, okay, sure, I guess.

ALEC

We gotta burn these things.

They hurl the garbage bag into one of the wings.

MEG

Kara, do the honors?

ALEXUS

Kara?

KARA lifts an arm like APOLLO did. The sound of an explosion from off and a red-orange light flashes.

ALEXUS

Woah-kay, did not know she could do that. Will have to change my disciplining accordingly.

The sound of the star – it's on top of the project.

ALEXUS

Y'all that star is hitting us, there's no way it isn't.

We can hear a swelling, speeding asteroid hurtling toward earth. Accelerating, picking up velocity, growing in force...

THE FURIES

Strike.

ALEXUS

Strike? What's that mean, what—?

The FURIES all crowd around ALEXUS as if to protect her.

All lights—house and stage—up suddenly and right back down again. As if a solar flare.

Lights back to normal.

Towering tall above everyone else, the center of the entire stage tableaux: the goddess ATHENA.

She wears a massive mask and a gown. She's standing at the center of a comet cracked wide open.

ATHENA steps down from her casing and the FURIES remove her mask in ceremony.

When she speaks, her voice is that of the woman
on the god-mic.

ATHENA

I'm finally come: The House of Atreus cradled in the palm of my hand.
I come not to interfere, but to collect the duly dead. I've done my piece.
In the hopes that you've done yours.

ALEC

What patron power are you?

ATHENA

I'm the fissure; you call me Athena. Regard me as a god. But I have no allegiance to your
ideas of gods. Grace and mercy, I'll offer what I can, but salvation'll be your onus.

I just come to collect the duly dead.

MEG

Right, right, right. And who exactly is the duly dead?

ATHENA

The seer and the false prophet come before me. And the chosen son misguided.

TISHA

The seer. That's probably Piano Man, right? Because irony.

ALEC

But then who's the false prophet?

MEG

I mean, who had false allegations for the fut—ohhhh, that one is Apollo.

TISHA

Well, I'll get him.

TISHA exits to one of the wings.

ALEC

Alexus, you could help us grab Piano Man?

ALEXUS has been stuck in awe all this time.

ALEXUS

(whispering)

Is she really a god?

ALEC

(whispering back)

Yes, she's really a god, now come help us get this man.

ALEC, MEG, and ALEXUS exit to the center building. ALEXUS transfixed all the while.

KARA

The chosen son? I think that's him.

ATHENA

(sees the state he's in)

Oh, shit, well okay.

KARA

Are you really a god?

ATHENA

I'm really a god.

KARA

... Miss Nessa?

ATHENA

I'm afraid not, sorry. But she's close to me. She's safe now.

KARA

Oh...

ATHENA

I know you sad. And that rage you hold? It's righteous rage. But if you have any hold of hope in your heart, you owe your hope for the future to the undue dead. Nessa. And a lot of people like her who die without much recognition at all. Does that make sense?

KARA

Not really.

ATHENA

Well, it will when you're older. It's important to remember the people we fail to remember. They're necessary pieces of the past and the bedrock of the present.

KARA

Will that make sense when I'm older too or?

ATHENA gives KARA a hug.

KARA hugs her back.

ATHENA pulls away.

ATHENA

I don't do that. So don't tell anyone I did that.

KARA

Why did you?

ATHENA

The past has been unkind to you. I just hope the future is better.

The siren song. Gradually, lights begin to oscillate red and blue.

The car stops out front the project. The brakes squeak as if to stop. A walkie chirps.

ATHENA cocks her head and raises her arm at the car.

The sound and flash of an explosion offstage.

TISHA reenters with the pile of limbs that is Apollo.

ALEC and MEG drag in PIANO MAN.
ALEXUS carries the portrait of ZAIRE.

ALEC

Woah, what the fuck happened to 12?

ATHENA

They won't be riding through The House anymore.

PIANO MAN

(hears her)

Whose voice? Athena? The goddess Athena? Are you here to deliver me to my Zaire?! If it's my time, I just wanna—

ATHENA touches PIANO MAN's shoulder and he goes slump. Dead immediately.

TISHA

Well, goddamn!

MEG

I hope he get to see Zaire on the other side.

TISHA drops the pile of limbs at ATHENA's feet.

ATHENA

And what's this?

TISHA

That's your seer. I don't know, he just kinda came like that.

ATHENA

Mhm. I'm sure he did.

KARA drags BISHOP's body to ATHENA feet as well.

ATHENA holds her cracked comet object.

ATHENA

I leave as quickly as I come. In my stead, I hope to leave a new order. An end to inherited violences. An end to—

TISHA

Dick measuring contests?

ATHENA

—sure, an end to... “dick measuring contests.” But wary of what I can't protect you from. Not now, at least. A more invisible evil.

DISEMBODIED VOICE (OFF)

“Realtor.com. The home for home search.”

TISHA

Oh, shit, Becky really coming?

ATHENA

Becky really coming.

You've worked to reestablish community. I've helped in whatever way I can. Don't let economy disrupt that. Protect the House as best you can. The goddess Athena leaves you to your own devices.

Lights down.

The noise of the star again. Except this time it's getting further, and further, and further away.

When lights come back up, ATHENA is gone
and so too is Piano Man, Apollo, and Bishop.

Oh, and the portrait of Zaire the Goat.

They all look at each other.

MEG

Well, I'll say it: what a fuckin' day!

EVERYONE ELSE

(variations on a theme)

OhmyGod, yes! / Glad you said it. /

KARA

Well, what now?

TISHA

Kids always be asking that shit: "What now?"; "Are we there yet?" Nigga, I don't know I'm
as lost as you. You know what I need? Some Paul motherfuckin' Malls.

ALEC

But LeVon say—

TISHA

LeVon! Don't! Tell! Me! What! to! Fuckin! Do! How much times I gotta tell y'all that?

TISHA exits into one of the wings.

ALEXUS

I guess I should get something to eat started. I don't know how Nessa made stew for the
hood and food for the house.

MEG

You need some help?

ALEXUS

Yeah, I could use y'all's help.

ALEC

Y'all's? Damn, Meg, I'm starting to feel like Tisha 'bout you, what you doing volunteering
me for stuff?

MEG

Just come on.

They three head for the building.

ALEXUS

Kara, I know you got superpowers or whatever, but you better bring yo' ass! You don't need to be outside by yourself. Nessa would kill me if she knew I left you out front the project by yourself.

ALEC

Shit, Athena might too.

ALEXUS

You hear that, Kara, "Shit, Athena might too." I ain't got no business crossing a god, you saw what she did to Piano Man. And his neck stronger than mine, it's been carrying that big-ass head for all those years.

KARA

Just one minute.

ALEXUS

Kara.

The FURIES gesture: "Let her."

ALEXUS

Fine. One minute. Not a second more. I'ma be looking at the egg timer too.

ALEXUS, MEG, and ALEC exit to the center building.

The star makes a noise again.

KARA

Athena?

Nessa's church hat from way back when—the one she wore all those dead ago—that hat, that crown,

d e s c e n d s

from a gentle sky.

KARA lies in wait and receives it in her hands at the center of the project.

She clutches the hat to her chest and looks up to the sky that delivered it.

KARA

Thank you, Miss Nessa...

(laughs real soft to herself)

Just Nessa...

(beat)

... mom.

KARA starts heading to the center building of the project.

In one of the alleys, a 'FOR RENT' sign spontaneously emerges from the ground.

KARA notices it and kicks it down on her way into the house.

KARA

Fuck you, Becky.

She's inside the House.

And she's home.

Lights to black.

End of Play.

Appendix A:

Notes on a Meal:

Yeah, I ain't actually got much notes on what the meal should be like.

It should feel like community. Like, immersive somehow (i.e. crew and maybe actors—if they so desire—remaining in character, could join in on the meal.)

Like an audience is getting to sit in a cookout in the hood for however long the intermission runs.

before public presentation, when there are runs, maybe cast and crew can potluck the meal?
nah, i'm wilding; who has time for eating during tech?

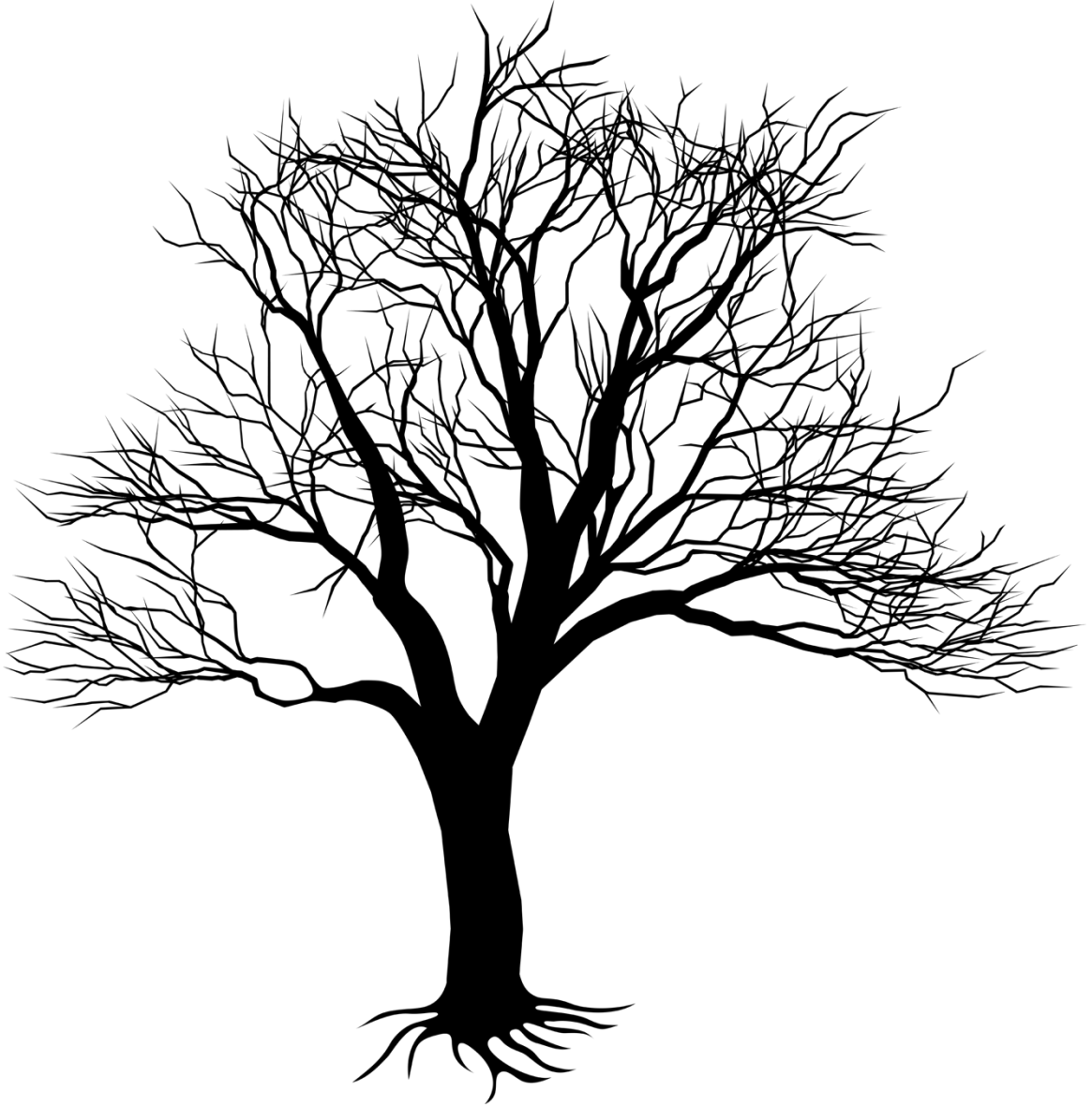
But mostly there should be booming music and food that's gently burnt.
(Bonus points if you can feature competing Aunties' mac and cheeses or fried chickens.)

But even if it's just packed peanuts or Welch's fruit snacks or something,
we should encourage people to chat and commune.

Not just mutter platitudes about the play.
maybe we even offer them a discouragement from talking about the play.
so we can take the break to check in/catch up/meet one another.

Admittedly, I'm writing this note while isolated in the vacuum that has been 2020, so maybe that's
where the desperate desire for community comes from, but it's there.
and I'd love to fold it into the encounter event of the play.

The idea being that this is the kind of community that lineages of violence interrupt.
It'd be really exciting if we could prompt connection.



SYCAMORE

Nicholas Kaidoo

CHARACTERS

EVIE-JUNE ELLIS, 75, black

MARGARET “MAG” ELLIS, 59, black

VANESSA “VAN” ELLIS, 38, black

LESTER WILKS, 41, black

BONEY, 45, black

RHYS, 3, black

SETTING

The living/dining room + kitchen of a double wide trailer

The Ellis Circle

Sycamore, South Carolina 29846

TIME

late July 4 – early July 5, 1999

I

EVIE-JUNE's home.

A double-wide trailer with a large wilting sycamore tree behind its backmost wall—the front yard of the property.

Except for that and the lights of a few other trailers in the distance, there's nothing but trees, grass, and red dirt for miles.

We can almost hear music from a boombox somewhere in the front yard...

The trailer itself is impressively open-concept: we see into the main living area: the living room, a dining room, and a kitchen all in the one space—from stage left to stage right, respectively.

Off stage right, into the wings, are the bedrooms.

The flooring in the kitchen is a layer of thin vinyl tiles. Beyond that, the kitchen is well kept but dated; appliances are lacquered by years of oil/grease stains that can't be cleaned away, and every appliance is just the slightest bit broken. The paint color in the kitchen is an old, worn yellow. So that the walls and the appliances seem filtered by the same sepia tone...

The living room has an old inset box TV. The sofa has an intricately designed upholstery—flowers and vines. There are mismatched rugs throughout the space—or a large vacuumed-but-matted carpet in the living room area.

The dining room is a small space between the two. Just a circular table with a few chairs placed around it. No grand centerpiece.

Down-center of the trailer, a door and accompanying screen-door open out to a shoddy, but comfortably-sized back porch. This porch creaks every second of every day; it struggles under any and all breezes that blow by it. There's no railing and rickety steps lead from the porch to an almost swampy mass of mud and grass. There are a couple of mismatched plastic chairs out here.

The back door is open, but the screen door stays shut.

VAN is on this back porch, gently bouncing RHYS (3), who's dozed off on one of her shoulders.

On her opposite side—hands-free—she holds a corded phone between her shoulder and her ear.

The phone cord curls and coils through the screen door and across the floor of EVIE-JUNE's trailer, leading all the way back to the base fixed into the kitchen wall.

EVIE-JUNE and MARGARET are inside.

VAN knocks softly on the screen door.

MARGARET approaches.

VAN

Rhys, you gon' go on with your grandma, okay?

MARGARET

His grandma don't want him.

VANESSA

Ma, please, I'm trying to get the Amtrak people on the phone.

EVIE-JUNE

Mag...

MARGARET

Fine, come on. He bet' not say nothing.

VANESSA

He should stay sleep, I promise. Thank you, Ma.

MARGARET

Mhm.

They exchange hold of the boy.

VAN

(into the phone)

Hello—?

(sucks her teeth)

Nana, could you press two for me?

EVIE-JUNE presses.

EVIE-JUNE

That good?

VAN

Try again. Press it harder.

MARGARET lays RHYS on the couch. He settles into a nap. EVIE-JUNE presses the button harder.

VAN

That's good. Thank you.

VAN sighs and slumps into one of the lawn chairs.

MARGARET

You was saying about Jane?

EVIE-JUNE

I seen that gal running around playing like it was her house.

MARGARET

Kids gon' play. But this land, Ma, we can't make a kids' game of who get the land.

EVIE-JUNE

It ain't no concern no time soon, Mag, god spare my life.

MARGARET

I know that, I'm just—and I don't want the land neither. I'm going back to the city, Ma. I got my own place.

EVIE-JUNE

You renting.

MARGARET

But it's mine.

EVIE-JUNE

It's yours on lease.

MARGARET

My name on the lease, I pay the rent, I raised my kids there; that's about as "mine" as it gets.

EVIE-JUNE

Let you slip up and not pay your rent next month and bet you it'll be someone else's the month after. Like you wasn't even there in the first place.

MARGARET

All due respect, ma'am, I'm not Lester or Boney or none of them boys. I pay my rent on time every time. I ain't never miss a payment.

EVIE-JUNE

My point is you nearly sixty years old and still paying payments.

MARGARET

I go and get a house; who I leave the house to, Ma? The same thing you stressing over, you want me stressing over that too? I got too much already stressing me out, one more thing might just do me in.

EVIE-JUNE

Yeah, but this stress? This stress I got? This stress is free. Your stress come with a fee every month.

MARGARET

You want me to have a house so bad, why you don't leave this one to me?

EVIE-JUNE

'Cause you got more means than most anyone in this family to get your own.

Look at it this way: you got the ingredients for bread in your pantry. You got the flour, the baking powder, the yeast, everything. And I know that. Now, let's say a couple days pass... Eventually, here I come with a loaf of bread I done made. Now, I see where I could give this

loaf of bread to you. *Or* I could give it to the starving man I spy sitting on the corner. Who you think I should *rightfully* give the bread to?

MARGARET

Well, you ain't said nothing 'bout that starving man being kin to you, so I think *rightfully*!—

EVIE-JUNE

Mag.

MARGARET

—I'm sorry, I just think *rightfully* you should give the house to your kin.

EVIE-JUNE

But you *don't* want it?

MARGARET

That's what I said.

EVIE-JUNE

I'm gon' take your word at its value now. What you saying to me, Margaret Ellis, is that you don't want this house - on this land - at this place - in your name?

MARGARET

Yes ma'am. I could take care of myself.

EVIE-JUNE

Nobody called your taking care of yourself into question.

MARGARET

Didn't they?

(shouting to outside)

Van, you still on the phone with the Amtrak people?

VAN

Yes, Ma. They still got me on hold.

MARGARET

You might as well give up and come on. Try 'em in the morning.

VAN

I gotta switch these tickets before then.

MARGARET

For what?

VAN

One second, Ma, I think they taking me off hold.

VAN takes the phone from her ear and sighs.
They're not taking her off hold.

EVIE-JUNE

Why you hollering at her like that?

MARGARET

I'm not hollering.

EVIE-JUNE

If you got something to say to her, why not step out on the back, say it, and come back in when you done.

MARGARET

I just want her to get that boy.

EVIE-JUNE

He ain't bothering nobody. Let him sleep, let her on the phone and just relax yourself, Mag. You don't got to try and control everything.

MARGARET

Who control everything? I couldn't control nothing if I wanted to. Nobody don't listen to me.

EVIE-JUNE

You could lie to yourself if you want to, but don't you sit here and boldfaced lie to me.

MARGARET

I got one—maybe two—of my kids'll listen to me on a good day. And that? That don't feel like I got control.

EVIE-JUNE

Let me caution you a rule of thumb: don't make as if you being fed to the lions when you sitting in the stands.

MARGARET

If I'm sitting in the stands, that lion must done got into the crowd.

EVIE-JUNE

Alright-alright, Daniel in the den, I'm gon' make some tea; you want some tea?

MARGARET

What kind?

EVIE-JUNE

The kind I got. Do you want some tea?

MARGARET

... no, thank you.

EVIE-JUNE crosses to the screen door and pokes her head out.

MAG crosses to look through the front door.

EVIE-JUNE

Van?

VAN looks over.

EVIE-JUNE

Any luck?

VAN makes sure MARGARET can't see, then nods no for EVIE-JUNE.

EVIE-JUNE

I'm making tea, you want some?

VAN

Please and thank you.

EVIE-JUNE nods and retreats back into the trailer.

VAN goes back to the phone, exasperated. She pulls a pack of Newports from her purse and lights one—taking great pains to make sure that neither EVIE-JUNE nor MARGARET can see her.

EVIE-JUNE turns on the tea kettle.

MARGARET

For me to have so much control, them fools still out there trying to light them fireworks. And for what?

EVIE-JUNE

'Cause fireworks are fun on the fourth. No one wanna be seen with them on the fifth. The fourth is a holiday, but by the time the sun come back up on the fifth, you best be ready to get back to normal. Gotta give 'em A for effort if they still out there trying.

MARGARET

They don't care nothing about them fireworks, they just want an excuse to stay out there carrying on as if the day not done with.

EVIE-JUNE

As long as they gone by the time I wake up in the morning.

MARGARET

No, but they oughta know: you gotta know when it's time to stop. That's how Lester ended up where he ended up.

EVIE-JUNE

Maybe that's what it is. Maybe Lester's like a full moon. Folks go crazy when he get close.

MARGARET

Let them boys get on the stand and try to use Lester fool self as a defense. God-willing they get a good judge.

EVIE-JUNE

God-willing they don't got to worry 'bout a judge at all.

MARGARET

Here come one now.

EVIE-JUNE

Who one?

MARGARET

My one.

MARGARET opens the door.

MARGARET

What you want, boy? It's late.

BONEY storms in carrying a ton of beer.

BONEY

Good evening, Ma. Good evening, grandmomma.

MARGARET

It's far past evening.

EVIE-JUNE

Boney, what you and them boys still doing out there?

BONEY

Just celebrating the holiday is all.

MARGARET

It's past time to be "celebrating the holiday."

BONEY

That's what holiday mean; the celebration last the "whole-o-the-day."

MARGARET

And the day done come and gone.

EVIE-JUNE

Y'all fixing to ring in the new morning.

BONEY

How about this? If you see the sun, I bet you won't see us out there no more. I put that on my mama.

MARGARET

Don't you put nothing on me. God forbid I die just 'cause y'all drunk fools sprawled out around the lawn.

BONEY

Ain't nobody drinking to get drunk. We just drinking to have a good time.

EVIE-JUNE

What you need, Boney? This ain't pleasantries hour.

MARGARET

Yeah, how many drinks does it take to get to the point?

BONEY

I didn't want to bother y'all. Tell you the truth, I thought you would be sleep.

EVIE-JUNE

Van needed somebody to let her in.

MARGARET

I told her I could do it.

EVIE-JUNE

And *I* told *you* I didn't trust you to do it.

BONEY

I just wanted to drop a couple things off for safekeeping.

MARGARET

I hope you left what you dropping off outside.

BONEY

What you mean?

MARGARET

I mean, you bet not have brought in no stash of liquor to keep in your grandmother's house.

BONEY

Ma, I'm grown.

MARGARET

Boney, it ain't about no "grown," it's about respect.

EVIE-JUNE

You don't think it's late?

MARGARET

No, because the fool act like he don't know how to read a clock.

BONEY

It's just for now. All the ice in the cooler melted and Bryant and them went to grab some more.

MARGARET

And that's supposed to make me happy that my son is trying to hide his stash in my mother's house?

BONEY

I'm not hiding nothing. I'm just trying to borrow a little fridge space.

EVIE-JUNE

Why you don't set-down and have some tea? Have some water?

BONEY

(re: the beer)

This is my tea, this is my water. I'm feeling mighty hydrated, thank you grandmomma.

MARGARET

Boney, why you don't listen what the woman tell you? Sitdown, have some water and stop all that drinking.

BONEY

That's what you heard? Because I heard a question mark. I ain't got no college degree or nothing, but I coulda swore I heard a question mark.

MARGARET

She saying she don't want you keeping all that liquor in her fridge, Boney!

BONEY

Where you heard that part?

MARGARET

Okay,-then-god-help-me, I'm saying it. Okay? I'm saying it for her.

BONEY

I just wanna keep it in the fridge a couple minutes while Bryant and them go get some ice.

MARGARET

And you gon' disrespect the woman house just like so?

BONEY

Grandmomma, I don't mean no disrespect. You know I don't got no disrespect in my heart. I would sooner pour all them beers out if you feel like I'm disrespecting you.

From here, MARGARET and BONEY are bickering: they're talking at EVIE-JUNE bur everything they say is pointed toward one another.

MARGARET

Pour 'em out then.

BONEY

Hold on a minute.

MARGARET

No, you a man of your word, Boney? Pour 'em out. You a man at all? Pour 'em out.

BONEY

Wait, I wanna hear what E-June gotta say.

MARGARET

And who in the world is E-June for you to be calling on her name like that? Like y'all talking friend-to-friend?

BONEY

I'm sorry, excuse me; I wanna hear what my grandmomma got to say.

MARGARET

For what? Why you wanna raise her pressure? Just get rid of the booze, Boney.

BONEY

Hold on, hold on—

MARGARET

It's sickening the way you drink, you don't see the time on the clock?

BONEY

It's a holiday. Ain't no such thing as business hours on a holiday.

EVIE-JUNE

Right now, both of y'all is raising my pressure.

BONEY

Just tell me: do you feel disrespected by me holding my beers in your fridge for just a few minutes?

MARGARET

Just say yes so he could take him and his swill outta here.

BONEY

'Cause, listen, Nana E-J: I'm not gon' drink none in front of you, I'm not gon' open none in front of you—you ain't even got to see 'em, just close this here fridge door and—"Poof!"—from out here, it's just like it's nothing in there anyway.

MARGARET

See Mama? This the "control" I got in this family. What am I gon' do with all this power?

EVIE-JUNE

Stop! Boney, leave that damn booze in the fridge and get out my face. But if it's in there, it's gon' stay there 'till morning. 'Cause I don't wanna *see you* and I don't wanna *hear you*: you're drunk and that makes me mad.

Mag, you got to stop bickering with every damn body over every damn thing. It's not good for my pressure and it's damn sure not good for yours. You not twenty years old no more, you can't hold all the anger in the world. When you twenty, your arteries and your heart give you that freedom. You could eat, sleep, and drink anger if that's what you wanna do. But when you—

(she knocks on the table for emphasis)

—knocking on sixty, you don't got that freedom no more. Them arteries that was giving you that freedom start to feel like the bars of a jail cell. So you best find you some calm and hold on to it. And do it in this lifetime, Mag, don't bet on being able to do it in the next one.

Beat.

EVIE-JUNE

Boney, why are you still here?

BONEY

I just...

Off EVIE-JUNE's look, he goes quiet. He tries to get to the fridge, but MARGARET blocks his path.

BONEY

Excuse me, Mama.

EVIE-JUNE

Boney, didn't I say I don't wanna see or hear you?

BONEY

But she's standing in the way for me to get my—

EVIE-JUNE

Didn't I say I don't wanna see or hear you?!

BONEY and MARGARET stare at each other. A standoff at the fridge.

Each daring the other to make a move.

BONEY relents. As he's leaving, he pulls a mini bottle of liquor and cracks it open. He drinks disappearing into the front yard.

VAN enters through the screen door and sets the phone back on the receiver.

MARGARET

Well?

VAN

Nothing yet. Nana, I'm surprised you up still.

EVIE-JUNE

I was trying to wait.

EVIE-JUNE pours a tea for her and VAN.

VAN

For what?

EVIE-JUNE

Lester making his way back 'round to the circle.

VAN

They just letting Lester out now?

MARGARET

They ain't letting Lester out on no Fourth, he been over there at that gal house.

EVIE-JUNE

Them working in the city don't do no processing Monday to Friday, you thought they would process the man on a holiday?

MARGARET

And them police know he be setting off them illegal fireworks, if anything, they would've put him back in for the holiday.

VAN

How he getting here? It's already something to 12.

EVIE-JUNE

He must be gon' fly here on his conviction.

MARGARET

God know it's hollow enough it should float.

VAN

Where he staying?

EVIE-JUNE

That's a good question. My only answer is, "Not here."

MARGARET

They couldn't keep him one more week? I be on that train outta here in a week. Wouldn't have to deal with him.

EVIE-JUNE

Oh Mag, we get it! Every year you come here just to count the days 'till you leave. For all that, you might as well not come at all.

MARGARET

I ain't mean it like that.

EVIE-JUNE

It don't matter what you *meant*, I'm talking about what you *said*. What you meant? That's for you, only you could know that. What you said? All the rest of us gotta sit with that.

VAN

Would you believe I can't even remember the last time I seen Lester?

EVIE-JUNE

Not even his mother Minnie remember the last time she seen him not in orange.

MARGARET

You know what Minnie said to me?

VAN

What she said?

MARGARET

Said when she visited him and saw him in the jumpsuit, it made her sick to her stomach. She said you could see every chip in his teeth, every wrinkle in his face, every scar in his skin. Said, "that fool Lester would call me on the phone and I could hear his lies louder 'cause I knew he was wearing that doggone orange." Said she was so tired of seeing that color, she was gon' start writing letters.

VAN

Letters to who?

MARGARET

She said I'm writing a letter to everybody in the family to burn every bit of orange in they closet and when they burn it, she said, "they better make the fire burn blue"; said I'm writing a letter to Tropicana to change the color of that juice in my fridge.

VAN

She leave it in there long enough, it'll turn a different color.

MARGARET

Ain't I told her that?

EVIE-JUNE

Who all else she writing to?

MARGARET

The last one she said: she said I'm writing a letter to the sun in the sky I'm so tired of the color orange.

VAN

Then I shouldn't wear that Knicks t-shirt I brought, then, huh?

EVIE-JUNE

You might could wear it to sleep.

MARGARET

Tuh, see if Minnie don't cut your behind while you sleeping.

VAN

Rhys gon' be in there with me.

EVIE-JUNE

You think that's gon' stop Minnie? She'll hold the baby with one arm and beat your behind with the next.

MARGARET

Wait, Van... where's George?

VAN

Oh, well...

MARGARET

Well, what?

VAN

I don't exactly know where George is.

EVIE-JUNE

You don't know?

VAN

No, ma'am.

EVIE-JUNE

Is he okay?

VAN

Your guess is as good as mine.

EVIE-JUNE

What happened to him?

VAN

I don't know that anything "happened to him." He was there when I went to bed last night, wasn't there when I woke up.

EVIE-JUNE

What about his bags and stuff?

VAN

Bags, stuff, and the rental car all gone.

MARGARET

So, the man just got up and left? Just like that?

VAN

Seems so.

MARGARET

Guess he figured for the fourth he was gon' go on and find his own independence.

EVIE-JUNE

Mag! That's not funny!

MARGARET

I think it's funny...

EVIE-JUNE

How you feeling, Van? You got something to eat earlier?

VAN

I feel like I got one less plate to fix, one less load of laundry to do—if George feel fit to make my job easier 'cause I don't gotta take care of a grown man anymore, more power to him. I'm the same woman now as I was yesterday and the same woman now as I'm gon' be tomorrow. That child got the same wants and needs now as he had yesterday and the same wants and needs as he's gon' have tomorrow.

RHYS starts tossing and turning, getting fussier and fussier.

MARGARET

Boy, stop all that whining!

VAN

Let me put him to bed.

MARGARET

Van, just tell that boy to go in that room and go to bed and don't make no noise.

VAN

He don't like being by hisself when he going to sleep. He gets scared.

MARGARET

He could get scared all he want, long as he don't make no noise. My nerves ain't tuned right to where I got patience this evening.

VAN

I'll be back.

MARGARET

You babying him.

VAN

Because he's a baby, ma.

MARAGARET

Babied boys stay boys. If George gone, it's on you to teach him how to be a man now.

VAN

It's plenty of time for that.

MARGARET

I don't get you; who you so intent on doing things the wrong way, why you so intent on not listening to me when I tell you something?

VAN

I'm not-*not* listening to you, Ma, I just—this is my son, *my son*, I just want to put him to bed how it's been working for me.

MARGARET

Oh, it's "your son"? Yours? You a mother now? Never mind you I done raised my six kids and they all turned out fine. You ain't had your first kid 'till you 35: never mind you that, you a expert after three years and one night alone.

EVIE-JUNE

Mag, stop it now. Van, carry that boy on in there.

VAN

Thank you, Nana. Ma, I'm sorry, I didn't mean nothing by it,—

EVIE-JUNE

Go.

VAN exits to the bedrooms, carrying, cooing, and rocking RHYS.

EVIE-JUNE

Why you won't let up off her?

MARGARET

Who need to let up off who? Did you hear what she said to me? You woulda never let me said something like that to you.

EVIE-JUNE

Mag...

MARGARET

Who let up off me? Life ain't let up. Every time I came to my wits end or had as much as I could hold, life just pressed on me harder.

EVIE-JUNE

But life ain't pressing on her, you are.

MARGARET

But at least she know where it's coming from when it's me, Mama; when life press on you, you don't know why or where from. It's harsh. At least this way she be ready when life see fit to press on her. And you know what: George up and disappearing just like that? Sound to me like life pressing on her already.

EVIE-JUNE

Then why you got to double-down for?

MARGARET

Because she my good one, Mama.

I don't want her falling to liquor or God-knows-what-else just 'cause life pressing on her. It's gon' get a whole lot harder before it get easier and I wanna build her shoulders to where she could carry the stuff without needing a vice. I love everyone in this family, but you see how them boys drink. You see how these men got they children all spread out all over like rain in a hurricane; she can't do that. That child is fixed to her and it's not my place to talk about if it's fair or it's not fair, I just know that it's *true*. She can't hold no dreams like Lester and them: she got to hold her life and another life in her one hand while she fighting with fate with the next one. Them odds not on her side, Mama.

EVIE-JUNE

She don't need odds on her side, she just needs her mother there.

MARGARET

I am on her side. Don't let nobody lie on me or my character: I'm always on the side of my kids.

EVIE-JUNE

It don't matter where your heart is, if your mouth is against them, Mag.

MARGARET

I raised six who know what the world is and how to meet it on its terms. I raised six who don't expect nothing to be handed to them and know they gotta work for whatever it is they want.

EVIE-JUNE

But you getting up there in years, did you raise six who gon' call and check in on you? Or are they gonna be too busy working for what they want to call they mother?

MARGARET

They gon' call me. That's just a matter of respect.

EVIE-JUNE

You too old, Mag, don't confuse fear with respect. And what's more, don't confuse "respect" for love.

MARGARET

All due “respect,” ma’am, Allendale is not Brooklyn; you ain’t seen all what I seen. It’s any number of holes for them to fall into up there.

EVIE-JUNE

Ain’t nowhere in the world so different that a little respect don’t go a long way.

MARGARET

If respect work the same way everywhere, why them fools still carrying on outside, huh? The *respectful* thing to do would be to call it a night: leave the last fireworks a lost cause.

EVIE-JUNE

Men are stubborn and I ain’t ask them by name yet.

MARGARET

Sounds like respect don’t go quite so far as you think it does.

EVIE-JUNE

Sounds like you don’t trust people to respect you as much as you trust them to fear you.

MARGARET

I’m not afraid of other people being afraid of me. It balances out. I spent so much of my life being afraid of something, it’s nice to have something be afraid of me for once.

EVIE-JUNE

If you nurse it long enough, respect become a kind of fear.

MARGARET

Yeah, but that kind ain’t got no teeth. That kind not gon’ haunt nobody or color their nightmares.

EVIE-JUNE

You need to hold onto people nightmares too?

MARGARET

That way at least you know they thinking about you.

EVIE-JUNE

I’m content for folks to fear me in my face, admire me from afar, but their dreams? They free to do with their dreams whatever they want.

MARGARET

You leaving crumbs on the table, then.

EVIE-JUNE

Ain’t nobody I want absolute power over. That’s too much responsibility.

MARGARET

Yeah, 'cause they'll sure 'nough blame you if something go wrong.

EVIE-JUNE heads for the front door.

MARGARET

Where you going?

EVIE-JUNE

Tell them fools to keep it down.

MARGARET

If they feared you, you could make them pack it up.

EVIE-JUNE

If a fool have enough beers, he don't remember nothing—even about what fear is.

MARGARET

How you know that?

EVIE-JUNE

I've seen it.

MARGARET

Is that for the better? Or for the worse?

EVIE-JUNE

Depend on the fool, depend on the day.

EVIE-JUNE exits.

VAN enters from the bedrooms.

MARGARET

You know you disrespected me in front of my Mama, you know that, right?

VAN

I didn't mean to.

MARGARET

I don't know why you want an audience to embarrass me but you got it.

VAN

If he stayed out here he would've got up and stayed up—and I just don't know if I got the heart to sit up with him. I'm barely holding myself together.

MARGARET

And why you feel that way?

VAN

Because, you know, where in God's-name is George? I couldn't rebook our tickets for the Amtrak so we fixing to miss our train. And now fool Lester could be here any minute? It's a lot.

MARGARET

I know I'll be happy when I could get out of Sycamore and back to New York.

VAN

When you going back?

MARGARET

Five days.

VAN

Maybe I could—

MARGARET

Sold out.

VAN

Oh.

MARGARET

It's more trains than the one tomorrow.

VAN

The last thing I want is to be stuck in Sycamore without a plan for getting out.

MARGARET

What's so bad about Sycamore?

VAN

You tell me.

MARGARET

Okay, that's fair.

(beat)

Evie-June keep pressing 'bout this house.

VAN

Why?

MARGARET

I think she afraid the family's growing apart.

Are we?

VAN

Beat.

VAN

Well, she *should* leave it to you.

MARGARET

For what?

VAN

You the oldest living of her kids.

MARGARET

I stand by my question.

VAN

So you don't want it?

MARGARET

If I'm itching to get out of Sycamore now, what makes you or Evie-June think I would want to spend the last years of my life here?

VAN

It'd be nice to be close to family...

MARGARET

Your family can't offset your misery if they're who all is causing it.

VAN

Don't I know it...

MARGARET

I'm sorry?

VAN

Nothing. Ma, I was thinking—

MARGARET

Don't say it.

VAN

—why don't we go in on a house together?

MARGARET

Van, no. I'm your mother not your man. You best go out and find your monkey-man Curious George if you want someone to get a house with.

VAN

Ma, please? With what you paying in rent and what I'm paying in rent, we could pay a mortgage easily. A two-family with a basement.

MARGARET

I'm content with my one-family apartment, thank you very much.

VAN

But picture it: I'm right there if you need me, you won't never have to be alone, / you could see—

MARGARET

Is it about *me* fearing being alone or *you* fearing being alone? 'Cause I don't mind being alone myself.

VAN

Once we pay it off, that's extra money in your pocket, Ma.

MARGARET

Let's be real, Van: I'll be long-dead before you finish paying on that house.

VAN

(knocks on the table)

God forbid.

MARGARET

Don't be cute.

VAN

What if we looked at one or two, just to see how we feel?

MARGARET

I already know how I feel. A house for what? What business I got giving a bank all that money?

VAN

All you doing now is giving a landlord all your money and what it get you? Least if you give the bank the money, you could own the house.

MARGARET

What it means to "own it", huh? What difference it make? When I'm dead, I'm still dead, ain't I?

VAN

Yeah, but we could keep it in the family.

MARGARET

I see you ain't mourn my death for even a second—but besides that—I'm tired of y'all young people saying "keep it in the family." It don't mean nothing when you say it. You looking for someone else to hand you what it is you want. If *you* want it, *you* get it.

VAN

Ma, a house would be good for all of us.

MARGARET

It don't matter if a house is not what *I* want.

VAN

Why you so resistant to it?

MARGARET

Don't you worry 'bout the "why," just worry 'bout the "no" I gave you.

VAN

If Mel asked you to get a house with her, you would do it. If Jerry asked you, you would do it. Why I'm the child you don't like?

MARGARET

That? we don't have time to get into tonight.

EVIE-JUNE re-enters.

VAN

So it's a flat-out no on the house?

MARGARET

(mocking)

Always and forever, my favorite child.

VAN

No different than anything else I ever asked of you.

VAN heads for the back porch.

MARGARET

Hol' on now—

VAN

I'm just gonna take a second to get some fresh air.

MARGARET

I'm talking to you, you listen when I'm—

VAN exits to the back porch.

EVIE-JUNE

Fear not the same as respect. Resentment not the same thing as love.

MARGARET

I'm building her up. Her skin gon' be thick enough for the winter.

EVIE-JUNE

Try to remember that you're her mother. You don't get to clock in and out.

MARGARET

Then she can't clock out either. I don't see what the big to-do is.

Outside, VAN pulls out a stack of scratch-off tickets and gets to work.

EVIE-JUNE

You know I would give you this house, right?

MARGARET

Mama, I don't want this house!

EVIE-JUNE

Whether you want it or not is irrelevant! I would give it to you is the point!

MARGARET

I thought you was gon' give it to Jane?

EVIE-JUNE

You could choose not to see the point: but I would do anything for you is what I'm saying.

MARGARET

Before you do, you should gauge whether or not I deserve to have anything done for me.

EVIE-JUNE

Don't be no fool now, Mag, you my daughter, okay? It's what a mother is supposed to do, you understand

... Now, help me find my glasses so I could read the good book before bed.

MARGARET and EVIE-JUNE exit to the bedroom wing.

BONEY comes along in the backyard. Sees VAN.

BONEY

Okay, you out here with the back-pocket scratchers, what yo' mother did this time?

VAN

Yo' mother ain't did nothing.

BONEY

I said *yo mother*.

VAN

Well, she was *yo mother* first. You got your back-pocket bottle.

BONEY

Shoot, this a regular Sunday for me, you know? And I put that on *yo' mother*.

VAN

You gotta lighten up with that drinking, Boney.

BONEY takes off his jacket and drapes it over
VAN.

BONEY

Yeah, yeah, you upset over something out here on a holiday—we could talk about my drinking tomorrow—what you upset about?

VAN

Boney...

BONEY

You my sister, Vanessa, I'm not gon' let you sit out here being sad by yourself. I'ma sit here, hear you out, and give you some advice in you need it. I'll just drink so I could hear you more clearly.

VAN

Exactly how much to drink you got hidden on your person?

BONEY

A magician's secrets. You ringing for a bartender or you just being nosy?

VAN

I don't know yet. What all you got?

BONEY

I got some Absolut and a little Tropicana.

VAN gestures for him to give them to her. She pours some of the vodka into the half-empty Tropicana bottle and shakes it up.

BONEY

Okay, if you gon' drink the drink, drink the drink, Van, don't sit here drinking orange juice with a splash of Absolut thinking it's gon' do something for you.

VAN

My liver been kept up to live, to do whatever it is a liver do. I don't know what yours been kept up to do, but this right here should do me right.

BONEY

You want me to run to the store and get you a Pepsi? Because you wasting my stuff and I got a feeling in my heart to take it back.

VAN

Sit down, Boney. What store you gon' go to in Allendale? Drive 20 minutes to the town only to realize ain't nothing open but the passenger window.

BONEY

Then pour the drink then, Van! Pour the drink and tell me what's upsetting you 'cause I love you but you pressing on my nerves.

VAN

What's upsetting you? You all in my face 'bout what sad look you think you see there, what's on *your* mind, Boney? What's pulling down your face?

BONEY

I can't talk about what's on my mind.

VAN

Why is that?

BONEY

'Cause you don't like the way I talk about my women.

VAN

You damn right I don't, Boney, you a grown man, you don't think it's time for you to talk about women with a kind of respect? Try to make an honest person out of yourself?

BONEY

See, I ain't got to worry about all that when I'm talking with Bryant. We talk about women the way we do because we men and that's what men do.

VAN

And you wonder why you and Bryant ain't got no woman?

BONEY

Oh, you got jokes?

VAN

I got a few I like to cycle through.

BONEY

Where's George?

VAN dodges his question:

VAN

They say Lester's coming back.

BONEY

Whose Lester? Not Minnie's son Lester? Not fool Lester?

VAN

Fool Lester in the flesh. Right back on these grasses in T-minus
(checks her watch)
 any minute now.

BONEY

Shit, then I best get going for real.

VAN

Going where, fool two? You act like you and fool one wasn't running partners.

BONEY

We was running partners back then, but what good is a running partner who got caught? Fool me once? That's Lester, fool one, shame on him. Fool me twice? That's Boney, fool two, they ain't gon' get Boney.

VAN

I'm telling you this as your sister, alright? The sun always comes up. You run in the shadows long enough, you run out of shade. And Nana'll be the first one to tell you: / "Whatever you do in the darkness comes to light."

BONEY

"Whatever you do in the darkness comes to light." Van, I know that. And Van, I'm trying. But I ain't never—not once in my life—I ain't never felt like I had no real choice today. And tomorrow becomes today so fast.

VAN

That's 'cause you trying to do today to change today when you gotta do today to change tomorrow. What I'm talking about is a leap of faith, Boney.

BONEY

I'm getting old, these joints don't work like they used to; I don't know how much leaping I got left in me.

VAN

That's the faith part, fool two.

BONEY

Who I'm putting that faith in? You?

VAN

You should be putting that faith in *you*. But since that ain't work in forty five years, sure, I'll hold onto it for you.

Beat.

BONEY looks at VAN.

BONEY

What?

VAN

Holding faith is a lot of work, that storage come with a cost. Love ain't free.

BONEY

Neither is Tropicana and Absolut; I say we call it even.

VAN

You so broke, Boney, it's a shame.

BONEY

Act like you know it then. What you doing asking a broke man for money?

VAN

Even a broke man get paid one day out the year.

BONEY

Yeah, well, that day sure as hell ain't the Fourth.

VAN

The taxman come.

BONEY

But the payroll don't.

VAN

You still got that job?

BONEY

(sucks teeth)

‘Course I still got that job.

VAN

They gave you all this time off?

BONEY

No.

VAN

Then how you—?

BONEY

What, they was gon’ stop me from walking out the door? I’ll clock back in whenever I’m done with my vacation.

VAN

You can’t keep doing that to them people.

BONEY

I do what I want, everybody know I’m on good terms with Mister Elliot upstairs.

VAN

You on good terms for now, but good will don’t last but for so long.

BONEY

I’m testing to see just how far it go.

VAN

Careful it don’t bite you.

BONEY

Girl, you must be done forgot: your brother got some years on him now, but ain’t no man ever put fear in my heart.

A rumbling engine in the distance.

VAN

You hear that?

BONEY

What’s that?

VAN checks her watch.

VAN

I think that might be the taxman.

BONEY

Damn sure ain't payroll.

BONEY starts to leave.

VAN

Where you running?

BONEY

I don't need no parts of that.

VAN

Then we found it.

BONEY

What?

VAN

The man who put fear in your heart.

BONEY

Chuh, Van, okay. Whatever you say.

BONEY exits, leaving VAN by herself.

She checks her scratchers. No winners. She tucks them back into her purse.

She takes out a Newport and lights it.

VAN

God, I don't ask you for a lot. Ain't even ask you nothing relating to no George, even. But I ask you: give me the strength—give us all the strength—to survive fool Lester.

She takes a drag and exhales.

VAN

Amen.

Beat.

VAN

Oh and P.S. – if you could fix those scratch-offs in my bag? That would be great. I don't need a whole lot or nothing, just a couple thousand would be good.

Right, so, uh... Amen... Again.

Lights down.

II

VAN ashes a Newport on the back porch.

The car engine noise gets louder. Closer.

VAN fishes in her purse for perfume and sprays herself a bit and airs out for a little while.

She smells herself and once satisfied, she heads back into the trailer, shutting the screen door behind her.

MARGARET and EVIE-JUNE enter from the bedrooms.

VAN

Y'all heard it too, then?

MARGARET

(sarcastic)

No, we came for the view.

EVIE-JUNE

That's prob'ly him.

MARGARET

I'm just happy Boney not here to welcome him.

VAN

It's too bad we have to be.

EVIE-JUNE

Y'all making it out like Lester is a bad person.

VAN

He not a bad person, he just a lot to be around sometimes.

MARGARET

Especially at a time of night like this.

A car door shuts.

VAN

What we supposed to say to him?

MARGARET

I personally want to say goodnight and go on to bed.

EVIE-JUNE

I'm right behind you.

VAN

You think y'all are gonna sleep soundly with fool Lester back around?

EVIE-JUNE

Whatever he wanna do, as long as he not doing it in or around this house, he free to do it.

MARGARET

I'm content with him cooking crack in this kitchen if he quiet enough for me to sleep.

EVIE-JUNE

Mag.

MARGARET

Not funny, I'm sorry.

VAN

That's not really what he got caught for, is it?

EVIE-JUNE

I don't rightly know what he went away for.

MARGARET

You would have to ask Minnie.

VAN

I thought she would be so busy seeing flashbacks of the color orange, she wouldn't remember properly.

EVIE-JUNE

You might be right about that.

VAN

You think it's weird, though?
Going from one way of being in the world to a whole 'nother way of being?

MARGARET

I hope you never have to find out.

EVIE-JUNE

But if you ever do, you'll learn that you just take each day on its own terms. Don't compare one to the next.

VAN

You think that's what Lester do?

MARGARET

Why don't you ask him?

LESTER knocks on the front door. VAN starts.

EVIE-JUNE crosses and opens it.

EVIE-JUNE

Come on in here before these gnats follow you in.

LESTER

Thank you, Nana-EJ.

Whew, let me tell y'all: it's a long way back to home, you hear me?

VAN

What's up, jailbird?

LESTER

Hi to you too, Van.

EVIE-JUNE

You're a sight for sore eyes.

MARGARET

And God help me if my eyes ain't sore.

LESTER

You want eyedrops Aunt Mag? I could get you some.

MARGARET

No, you made it home safely, thank God. I just need to get some rest.

VAN

That's all the bags you brought? What, you gotta travel light when you on the run?

LESTER

"Light?" I got everything I would ever need in this bag. If it's anything they learned me inside of them concrete walls it's: the only difference between having everything and having nothing is being in the right place at the right time.

VAN

Here come this fool wanting to sound like the diet Malcolm X.

EVIE-JUNE

Sound more like the fortune cookies in the back of the Piggly Wiggly.

MARGARET

Lemme guess: you read the Bible while you was in there? You found God?

LESTER

EJ, would you tell my Auntie I ain't turn to no God what ain't turn to me first?

MARGARET

Where all you been, Lester? Know they ain't just let you out on no Fourth of July. For sure know they ain't let you out at this kinda hour.

LESTER

It's a couple friends I stopped to see along the way. To get to Sycamore, you got to drive through a whole lotta places, you know.

VAN

I'm sure it's one or two friends in particular you spent a night or two with...

LESTER

See, Van, you trying to get me into trouble. I am but a weary traveler who needed to rest his weary head. No more, no less.

EVIE-JUNE

You trying to play us all to be the fool?

LESTER

Never.

MARGARET

You seen Bryant and Boney and them out there?

LESTER

Yeah, I shouted at them. They down the way. I'm sure I'll go see what they up to soon.

MARGARET

(to EVIE-JUNE)

Fear woulda had them fools in they houses by now.

EVIE-JUNE

Just would've made them drink heavier.

LESTER

Don't nobody look drunk-drunk. Van, why you don't go out there with 'em? What you doing in here with the old folks?

VAN

You forget I got a kid now, Lester?

LESTER

Oh, that's right! Little Maurice. Where he at?

VAN

He in there sleep.

MARGARET

You acting like you showing up at 2 pm the afternoon of the fourth,

(checks the clock)

when we officially leaking into the fifth now. Ain't no family reunion-ing at this time of night.

LESTER

It sure feel like it. Ay, where my hugs at? A man ain't been 'round the circle in five years and gotta *ask* for hugs? Them 2000s must gon' be harsh on the soul. Y'all all so hard going into 'em.

LESTER drops his bags.

LESTER

Y'all two excuse me, I gots to give EJ her hug first.

LESTER hugs EVIE-JUNE.

EVIE-JUNE

Lester, you careful not to squeeze too hard now. You know how my back be.

LESTER

Mm. But I wanna squeeze five years' worth of love and advice outta you. Who know all what sage advice I missed out on.

EVIE-JUNE

Five years, all the advice I got for you is don't go back.

LESTER

See that's smart advice, but that's not *sage* advice. I need some riddles, I need some make-me-work-for-it. Or tell me what the good book say that I ain't thinking on.

EVIE-JUNE

The good book say, in the Gospel of Evie-June Ellis: "Fool, don't go back to jail."... chapter one, verse one.

LESTER

Mm, I don't know, EJ. Your advice not washing over me like it used to. I hope you not slipping.

MARGARET

Lester, I got half a mind to not touch you 'cause I'm afraid to catch your stupid.

LESTER

I made some mistakes, I'm not scared to admit that. But I know I'ma try to make right today what I did wrong yesterday.

VAN

What about what you do wrong today?

LESTER

Hush up, Van, ain't nobody listening to you right now; it's me and Aunt Mag.

MARGARET

You better hurry up or it's gon' be you and only you, I ain't got time to be standing here all night.

LESTER gives MARGARET a hug.

LESTER

You got some muscle on you, so I'ma put a little more squeeze on you than EJ.

MARGARET

Don't you talk cross on me, now. Welcome home, Lester.

LESTER

It really do feel good to be back. You don't notice all what you take for granted. Walking up those front steps, hearing those fools playing they music, smelling the grass in the circle—when I tell you I nearly cried in the car? I was wiping the corners of my eyes with some McDonald's napkins.

EVIE-JUNE

Lester, tell me you been eating you some real food somewhere.

LESTER

McDonald's is real food.

EVIE-JUNE

Lester.

VAN

I'm sure a Coke and a Big Mac sit on your stomach better than a cheese sandwich and toilet wine.

MARGARET

Probably had to grill a bar of soap for dessert.

VAN

Talking 'bout "Mm, if it smell good, I bet it taste good."

VAN and MARGARET laugh.

LESTER

(stifling a laugh)

Van, you better stop playing. EJ, I ate.

EVIE-JUNE

McDonald's you ate? That's good eating for you?

LESTER

Only 'cause I been wanting it so long, EJ. I don't know if you know, but they don't let you out just 'cause you want you a Big Mac.

EVIE-JUNE

Lester, all that junk ain't got no nutrition in it. You got to eat right if you gon' get your mind right.

LESTER

Oh, that I ain't worried 'bout. My mind right. My mind been right for *years* now.

VAN

But it's been wrong for so much years before that.

LESTER

My mind ain't been no more wrong than yours.

VAN

I never said mine was right. You know I could flip in a minute.

EVIE-JUNE

What you gon' do now that you back home?

LESTER

Stop playing, Van. What you said EJ?

MARGARET

What you gon' do now that you home?

LESTER

Oh, you know I got to find a way to put a dollar in my pocket.

VAN

Could you find a way to put a dollar in mine?

LESTER

Of course. If I'm eating, all my family gon' be eating.

MARGARET

Forgive me for not wanting to eat off your stash.

EVIE-JUNE

Lester, don't you turn around getting right back into trouble.

LESTER

Hand to my heart, no trouble. Just looking after honest work, EJ.

MARGARET

Is that hard?

LESTER

What?

MARGARET

Getting honest work as a dishonest man?

LESTER

Ha, ha.

MARGARET

Honest question.

LESTER

From my dishonest Aunty.

EVIE-JUNE

Hey now.

LESTER

Whatever I say, I say it with love.

MARGARET

I don't say nothing not with love.

LESTER

See EJ? All love.

VAN

You gon' be disappointed when you find out I ain't got not a bit of love for your fool self.

LESTER

Hush up, Van, come give me a hug.

VAN hits him.

LESTER

Ow, what's that for?

VAN

For giving everybody else a hug before me. I was closest to the door.

LESTER

Yeah, but you forgetting I don't like you.

(off EVIE-JUNE's look)

I say with love. I do love her, EJ. You ain't said I had to like nobody.

VAN

Come here, fool.

LESTER and VAN hug.

VAN

Whatever work you get: make it honest and make sure you alone, do you understand me?

LESTER

Yes, Van...

VAN

Don't roll your eyes. Do you understand me, Lester Wilks?

LESTER

I'm not gon' do nothing wrong, okay, Van? I promise.

MARGARET

She talk to Lester more harsh than she talk to her own child.

EVIE-JUNE

Her own child probably listen when she talks.

VAN

Exactly. Thank you, Nana.

LESTER

Hol' on, I'm the least hard-headed person in this room.

MARGARET

Oh, so you did five years for being so soft-headed? Good to know.

LESTER

No: now I got my convictions and I'm not gon' compromise on my convictions. But I'm quick to take in information and make decisions based on that.

MARGARET

Mhm, sure. Look at my face. You see that face? That's the face of someone who was born yesterday.

LESTER

I'm not pulling no wool, honest.

EVIE-JUNE

Yeah, well, we'll believe it when we see it.

LESTER

Not you too, EJ.

EVIE-JUNE shrugs.

LESTER

Come on, I just got out and it's like I'm already on trial again.

VAN

It's only 'cause you got one, two, and three eyewitnesses to your past.

LESTER

Y'all talk to everybody like this? EJ, you got some charcoal or something?

EVIE-JUNE

No.

LESTER

Huh, well that's funny, because y'all is sure as hell grilling me in this kitchen. Shoot, I see why Boney and Bryant and them out there drinking.

MARGARET

Oh please.

MARGARET heads for the bedrooms.

LESTER

Where you going?

MARGARET

I'm tired of listening to you. I done welcomed you; warned you against your old ways. I did my part. So I'm free to sleep if I so desire and I do so desire. So goodnight, Mama. Goodnight Van, keep an eye on that boy. Lester, you ain't going to no bed so I ain't wishing you goodnight. I'll just see you in the morning.

MARGARET exits.

LESTER

Guess that's my cue to leave too then.

EVIE-JUNE

Where you going this time of night, fool Lester?

LESTER

Where I said: I'ma go see what Boney and Bryant getting up to.

VAN

Boney might not wanna be around you.

LESTER

Boney might what? Girl, he gon' get over it then. I got something of an offer for him.

EVIE-JUNE

Lester...

LESTER

It's honest, EJ, all my opportunities are honest from here on out.

EVIE-JUNE

Go on if you going.

LESTER

I'll be back soon.

EVIE-JUNE

I don't know why you all think you can come and go to Evie-June house at your whim, but that door not revolving, it got a lock on it. And after a certain hour that door is one-way. You know what one-way mean fool Lester?

LESTER

Yes ma'am, I know what one-way mean.

EVIE-JUNE

Good. Keep that in your head if you decide to walk out that door.

LESTER heads for the door.

VAN

You still going?

LESTER

Van, I just got free, you think I'm gonna concern myself with made up rules about when and where I'm allowed to go? All due respect Nana EJ, I'm not gon' disrespect your home or your rules, but I couldn't go or do for five years. If I got the chance to go or do today? I'ma take it.

VAN

Well, you just go on ahead then.

LESTER

I will.

LESTER pushes open the door and swaggers out.
The door shuts heavy behind him.

VAN

You going to bed now?

EVIE-JUNE

I feel like that's where I should be at my age at this time of night. What you gonna do?

VAN

I guess I'll go in there and lay with Rhys.

EVIE-JUNE

What's wrong?

VAN

Nothing's wrong.

EVIE-JUNE

Vanessa, I'm old not dumb. What's wrong with you?

EVIE-JUNE sits at the table.

VAN looks to the wing.

VAN

She can't hear me, can she?

EVIE-JUNE

No. It's just you and me right now.

VAN joins her.

VAN

Nana, I... I'm not scared or nothing. But... it's a lot, right? Like I'm not crazy to think it's a lot, am I? I don't even know what I feel yet.

EVIE-JUNE

You're not crazy. You're still in shock.

VAN

I don't even think it's shock.

EVIE-JUNE

Denial then.

VAN

See, I would even kind of appreciate denial, you know? Because denial is, like, disbelief of something that you know to be true. I'm not even that far along yet.

EVIE-JUNE

Look at the hands on your watch. You see the time?

VAN

Mhm.

EVIE-JUNE

And take a look around you. You see this house?

VAN

Mhm.

EVIE-JUNE

Now, at this time, in this place, do you see George next to you?

VAN

No, Ma'am.

EVIE-JUNE

Then that's what's true. That's the only what's-true you got to work with. So that's the one you believe. If he show up later, that's just what *he* do. Don't let that have no bearing on you and what you do or how you live.

VAN

But what do I do? Like how do I just flip the switch? I know what I said, but everything today *feel* so different from yesterday.

EVIE-JUNE

I'll tell you what you gon' do; you gon' keep clothes on y'all's backs, a roof over y'all's heads, and food in y'all's bellies. That's it. That's all it's your job to do. Everything else: you ask God for guidance and see if you don't find a way—with footprints big enough for two. The footsteps walking with yours is gon' get bigger and bigger and bigger still until they not

walking with you no more, you look up and see they're walking away from you. And that's how you'll know you did what work you was supposed to.

Okay?

VAN nods.

EVIE-JUNE

That makes sense to you?

VAN nods.

EVIE-JUNE

Good. I need to rest, so if it's okay with you, I'll leave you out here to your lonesome. Just remember to cut the lights when you done.

VAN

Will do.

EVIE-JUNE

Goodnight Vanessa.

VAN

Night, Nana.

EVIE-JUNE retreats to the bedroom wing.

VAN crosses and steps out onto the back porch.

LESTER walks around the back way.

VAN

What you doing back so soon?

LESTER

I got halfway down there when I realized I forgot my cigarettes.

VAN

You know Nana said you not allowed back in the house.

LESTER

She said the front door was one-way; she ain't said nothing about the back door.

VAN

You really towing the line.

LESTER

You could do me a favor?

VAN

I wanna say no, but what is it?

LESTER

You could go in and grab my cigarettes and bring 'em out here to me? Then I wouldn't even be breaking EJ's rules.

VAN

(sucks her teeth)

Hol' on, fool.

VAN goes back into the house and grabs
LESTER's cigarettes from a side pocket.

She comes back out and tosses the pack in stride.

LESTER catches it.

LESTER

You a lifesaver.

VAN

Whatever. Hey, Lester?

LESTER

What's up?

VAN

You saw Boney over there?

LESTER

Yeah, he was out there. Why?

VAN

No reason... He was still drinking?

LESTER

It's Boney, Van, I'd be worried if he *wasn't* drinking.

VAN

Lester, he getting up there in age. And he was in there hollering at Ma.

LESTER

He a big boy, Van, let him make his choices and live with them.

VAN

At what point do your vice stop being a choice?

LESTER

It's bothering you that much?

VAN

I'm worried about him.

LESTER

He not doing no more than he usually do.

VAN

It feel like he is, though.

LESTER

What make you say that?

VAN

He got a whole stash in there stuffed in Nana fridge.

LESTER

Right...

VAN

But he still keep pulling bottles from somewhere.

LESTER

Sound to me like the man just prepared.

VAN

It sounds to me like he got a problem.

LESTER

So what? You wanna do something about it?

VAN

What could I do? I already talked to him.

LESTER

Van, that's your brother. Don't tell me I know the man better than you do.

VAN

What you mean?

LESTER

Boney don't respond to words, only action. You wanna make a point? Point me to where he got his liquor hid. And bring a towel on your way out.

LESTER starts toward the house.

VAN

What about Nana rule about—

LESTER

That's why we gotta move fast Van, now, come on.

They sneak into the screen door, VAN points LESTER to the fridge and disappears briefly into the bedroom hall.

They emerge back out into the backyard.

LESTER

This is a lot.

VAN

That's what I was saying. Why you needed the towel?

LESTER

Let me show you.

VAN hands the towel to LESTER, who wraps as many beer bottles as he can in the towel.

LESTER

That's step one.

VAN

What's step two?

LESTER jumps onto the bottles. Doing this over and over again until he quietly smashes all the bottles.

LESTER

That's step two.

VAN

That's... one way of doing things...

LESTER picks up the towel from the ground and shakes the shards of glass from the towel.

LESTER holds the towel up to VAN's nose.

LESTER

What's that smell like to you?

VAN

Smell strong like liquor.

LESTER

No, Van! That stink you smelling—

VAN

Liquor...

LESTER

—No! That smell is change, Van, smell it again. Smell it with some perspective this time.

VAN

I ain't got but two nostrils and both those nostrils can't smell nothing over that Budweiser. Get that towel from out my face, Lester!

LESTER

C'mon, Van, don't start thinking like Mag and them. You could always think bigger than that.

VAN

I can't think bigger than nothing. My only concern in the world is 'bout two feet tall.

LESTER

Careful, Van. Those stretch marks getting to look like scars.

VAN

Shut up, Lester. You got your cigarettes. Go on and leave me alone.

LESTER

Thank you, cuz.

VAN

Mhm.

LESTER takes out a cigarette and puts it in his mouth as he exits back into the yard.

BONEY sneaks in through the front door of EVIE-JUNE's trailer.

VAN goes back into the house.

Sis.

BONEY

He back.

VAN

I done a good job of avoiding him.

BONEY

So far...

VAN

BONEY crosses to the fridge and notices his liquor is missing.

BONEY

Okay, Van, where is—

VAN

Who you think?

BONEY slams the fridge door.

VAN

Fool, be quiet before you wake up Ma and Nana!

BONEY

I'm just gon' have to put my foot in that fool's behind! How you go away all that time and the first thing you wanna do when you get back is to mess up my night?

BONEY sucks his teeth and storms out through the front door.

VAN cuts out the lights and exits to the bedrooms.

LESTER walks back through the backyard.

LESTER

Dammit, first the pack and now a lighter? Where the hell is your head fool Lester?

LESTER crosses to the screen door. He knocks. Once he realizes that VAN isn't coming, he sneaks in himself.

He fishes around in his bag and exits with a lighter.

As soon as he gets onto the porch, BONEY re-enters.

BONEY

You motherfucker, I seen you walking 'round the back of the house. Who the hell you think you was throwing out my liquor?

LESTER

Hello to you too, fool two.

BONEY

Lester, man, if you don't shut up, I'm fixing to beat your ass right now.

LESTER

Boney, you drunk than a skunk. What, you gon' fight me on these steps outside EJ house? You can't nearly stand you ugly motherfucker, why don't you sit somewhere and sober up?

BONEY

Oh fuck you, fool Lester. I'll sit with you, but I ain't planning on sobering up until I see the sun.

LESTER

You gon' drink your brain cells dead. Damn near won't remember who you are.

BONEY

What good I got done happened to me that's worth remembering?

LESTER

It's not about good or bad, the remembering is what give you urgency.

BONEY

Yeah, well, you always had enough urgency for the both of us so you keep your urgency, I'll keep my booze and whatever forgetfulness it might gift me; and we'll see where the two of us end up.

LESTER

Where you gon' end up, Boney? You a lackey.

BONEY

Better watch your mouth. I ain't no goddamned lackey.

LESTER

Yeah? How come you ain't never get those set of wheels you wanted?

BONEY

Well, 'cause Van said—?

LESTER

Oh word, right, so Van said...

BONEY

Hol' on, just because I got sense enough to know when someone's right don't mean I'm nobody's lackey.

LESTER

But you don't got the sense is what I'm telling you, Boney. 'Cause here I am sitting right in front of you—right as rain—and you blind as all hell to see it.

BONEY

Lester, if you had anything worth seeing, you would show it to me in the daytime. Why it is you move only at night?

LESTER

'Cause you gotta work while the next man sleeping, Boney! See: you too busy working after what the next man got; I want more for myself. I can't stand you. Here I come trying to wise you up to what I wised up to and you closing your ears to it. Like I'm feeding you Monday's fish on a Friday.

BONEY

The problem is, Lester, I wouldn't eat your Friday's fish on a Friday. So whatever it is you selling, I'm not buying.

LESTER

I'm tired of you simple, backwoods ass niggas. You look at any other group—any other group and how they got ahead? Together. Not niggas. Nope. Not black people. Let me tell you something, Boney, 'cause if it's one thing I know, it's this: ain't no fate in this country worse—ain't no fate more lonely—than being a nigga with a dream. 'Cause the first thing come against you and the last thing come against you be a whole slew of niggas who ain't got none.

BONEY

Oh, get off it, Lester. Excuse the already-lied-to for not trusting the lifelong liar. You ain't come down here with no law degree trying to game niggas on the law; you ain't come down here with no small business trying to give niggas a job.

LESTER

What I'm selling you if it's not a business of a sort?

BONEY

See: that "of a sort" is where you get yourself into trouble Lester!

LESTER

All I'm doing is making deliveries for a man. That's good, honest work. That's all I wanna fold you into.

BONEY

What you delivering?

LESTER

I don't know *what*.

BONEY

That ain't no way to work.

LESTER

I only know what I need to know.

BONEY

All "need to know" means is that someone is keeping some important information from you.

BONEY starts to exit.

LESTER

Boney, come on, hear me out: it's good money.

BONEY

Goodbye fool one.

LESTER

Come on now! I'm trying to...

BONEY's gone.

LESTER

Fuck! Agghhhhh!!!

VAN runs out.

VAN

Lester, stop all that yelling out here! We trying to sleep.

LESTER

Who is we?

VAN

Me, Ma, Nana, Rhys.

LESTER

Nice y'all could sleep so comfortable.

VAN

Lester, it's late. Why don't you go to bed and we can talk in the morning.

LESTER

I can't sleep. I'm not ever a person, really to say I need sleep.

VAN

What are you talking about you "not a person"? You a/—

LESTER

I'm not. You going back to New York, Van. With people and faces and crowds and—where I'ma die? Here? With 'bout ten people knowing my name and 'bout fifty people knowing I was even here at all? If I passed today, my kids wouldn't even care. Wouldn't even know. I don't even know where they are. You got Rhys, I don't even know where mine is—wouldn't know where to look for 'em. I guess Denise figure since I went away it was only fitting for her and the boys to go away too. Never mind you I ain't get no address. No postcard, no postage, no nothing so I could seek out where my sons is in the world. Never mind you I'm going crazy whole time I'm in that fuckin' cell 'cause I'm worrying for them. But everybody just seeing me as fool Lester; figure they seeing the whole picture while I'm only seeing piece of it. My kids was stole from me by they own mother—a woman I loved—because she see where it's for they own good. You know how that sit on a man's soul, Van? All I ever wanted for five years was to see my sons again. You know how many days that is?

VAN

Sumn like fifteen hundred.

LESTER

I don't want you to shortchange what I been through. I did the math:

*(fishes through his pockets for a notebook;
he takes it out, and flips to an earmarked page)*

This the book I kept with me... One thousand eight hundred and twenty five. See? You cut off almost a whole year. A whole year of just... dread.

VAN

And this chickenscratch, what this supposed to say? You writing in tongues?

LESTER

Van, you joking. I'm being serious. These is hashmarks. I would draw a hash for every day I ain't see my boys. At first, I thought it wouldn't be long 'til Denise brought 'em for a visit. But once the hashes start to fill out one line and another one and another one, you get to sitting with yourself and you realize you might never see your sons again.

VAN

You'll see those boys again.

LESTER

I don't know that, Van. And you don't either. You a *know-it-all* but it's some things even you don't know.

VAN

Lester, I'm sorry. It's nothing I could do to help you. I wish it was, but it's not.

LESTER

It might be.

VAN

Like what?

LESTER

Could I hold Rhys?

VAN

He's sleep.

LESTER

I wouldn't have to wake him. I could rock him—matter fact, I won't give him back to you until he done fell back to sleep.

VAN

Lester...

LESTER

Van, please? Like a minute and then I'll never bother you about it again. This the only thing would make my "home-coming" feel like it's a home worth coming home to.

VAN

Lester, one minute.

LESTER

One-minute, that's all. If that, even.

VAN sighs big. She goes back into the house and comes back carrying a half-asleep RHYS.

VAN

Rhys, you gon' meet your cousin Lester, okay?

She hands him to LESTER.

VAN

Be careful with him.

LESTER holds him gently.

LESTER

Hey, partner. It's your cousin Lester. You looking like a little man already. Except for this coat, let's get you out of that.

VAN

Leave the coat.

LESTER

Van, this South Carolina in the summer, the boy look foolish in a jacket.

VAN

If he a fool, y'all are matching as long as he keeps the coat on.

LESTER takes RHYS's jacket off.

LESTER

Let me give you some advice: you can't keep babying him. You want him to grow to be a man, you gotta treat him like a man.

VAN

Lester, he gon' catch cold! The *boy* is three years old!

LESTER

Stop, Van! Only a man could teach a man how to be a man!

VAN

Well then, I'm gon' teach him how to be something other than a man because that is my child and you better give me back my child right goddamn now.

LESTER

I'm a teacher, alright, Van? Ain't nobody taking your child from you, but I'm built for this. For-for culling boys to men.

VAN

Lester, what all do you think you gon' teach the boy in two hours on a breezy night in July?

LESTER

What you mean? I'm not going nowhere, it ain't got to be only one night.

VAN

I'm leaving, Lester! Tomorrow.

LESTER

You leaving?

VAN

Yes and as soon as I can for Christ's sake.

LESTER

Y'all not staying for a couple weeks?

VAN

We did. You missed it.

LESTER

... that's not my fault.

VAN

Yes, it is Lester. You ain't get let out on no Fourth. You went where you felt you needed to go and stayed there. Can't nobody make their schedules around your comings-and-goings. I got my life to take care of and

(*re: RHYS*)

his life to take care of.

LESTER

And when you leave, you taking... / him with you?

VAN

Yes I'm taking my child with me when I go! Did they make you *stupid* in jail?

LESTER

I didn't know! Addy left Johnny down here for the summer so I thought maybe...

VAN

I'm taking him with me tomorrow *and* I'm taking him with me now. Give me my son, Lester.

LESTER

But, Van... his daddy not here, I could be a good big cousin influence on him, Van I'm a good guy, I could be a good influence on your boy.

VAN

Denise took your boys because you're *not* a good influence! I think you-you-you mean well. I think you have a good heart. I think you even got some wit to you that you just misplaced in your life so far. But don't take my son out his jacket like you doing a favor.

LESTER

I'm in such a good place to where I could care for him.

VAN

Lester, how do I know you not drunk or doped up right now?

LESTER

(*deeply hurt*)

Van...

VAN

How do I know?

LESTER

Van, I'm clean. I told you I was clean.

VAN

But how do I *know* that? You done told me a whole lotta things over a whole lotta time.

LESTER

If that's how you feel, Van, could you-could you give me some space please?

VAN

Could you give me my *fucking* son, Lester?

RHYS starts crying.

LESTER

You upset him.

VAN

Fool-Lester-motherfuckin'-Wilks, you give me my son and you get out of my face with your nonsense, do you understand me?

VAN approaches LESTER.

LESTER

Van, I said give me some space.

VAN

Nigger, are you holding my kid hostage? Are you-are you kidnapping my son? What the fuck are you doing?

LESTER

Stop that, Van. You stop it right now. I would never hurt your boy and you know that. You my favorite cousin.

VAN

(*tearing up*)

Lester, please, I got too much stress on my heart today.

RHYS starts squirming.

VAN

Rhys, come here.

He's trying, but LESTER won't let him go.

LESTER

C'mon little man, it's cousin Lester. You running with the boys now—you running with the men.

VAN

Lester, he wants to come to his mother! Give him to his mother!

LESTER

Van, I'ma just go right down the way and come back, that's all.

VAN picks up shards of glass from the ground and throws them at LESTER—he has to sidestep to avoid being hit—he cradles RHYS's head when he does.

LESTER

Are you fucking crazy, Van?

VAN

Am *I* crazy? You got some nerve, Lester Wilks!

VAN steps toward LESTER. When she does, he steps back and tenses his body around RHYS.

VAN

You not gon' hurt him, Lester, right?

LESTER

I just wanted to hold him, Van...

VAN

(desperate)

And you held him, Lester, please give me my son, Lester. You gon' see your boys again, I promise, Lester, you gon' see your boys again.

LESTER

I'm not gon' see my boys again.

VAN

(ibid.)

You gon' see your boys again.

LESTER

No, I'm not.

MARGARET and EVIE-JUNE exit.

EVIE-JUNE

What's going on out here?

MARGARET

Y'all making a whole heap of noise. You don't know what time it is?

EVIE-JUNE

Van, what's wrong? Why're you crying?

VAN

I'm okay, Nana, just please tell Lester to give Rhys back to me.

MARGARET

See this is what quote-unquote respect look like. Fear? He'da gave that boy back by now.

EVIE-JUNE

Lester, give Van back her child.

LESTER

I can't do that.

EVIE-JUNE

And why you can't do that, Lester?

LESTER

(tearing up)

I just can't.

MARGARET

Now this fool crying. Lester, listen to me, you need sleep.

LESTER nods no.

EVIE-JUNE

Yes, Lester, you do. You need to give Van back her child and go on and get you some rest.

LESTER

No, 'cause what if they come and get me while I'm sleep?

EVIE-JUNE

What if who come get you?

LESTER

Then I'm sure not gon' see my boys again.

MARGARET

Who coming to get you, Lester? You bet' not had brought no trouble on your tail.

LESTER

Look how gentle I hold him. I hold him good, don't I, Van?

EVIE-JUNE

Yeah, you hold him good, now give him back to his mother.

LESTER

Van gotta promise she gon' tell 'em I hold her boy good.

MARGARET

Who is them?

LESTER

APD. What if APD come while I'm sleep and they cuff me and they take me back?

EVIE-JUNE

Lester, they not gon' do that. You ain't did nothing. You ain't did nothing, right?

LESTER

I ain't did nothing last time.

VAN

Lester, my son please...

MARGARET

No, you *convinced* yourself that you ain't did nothing last time.

LESTER starts creeping to the edge of the yard.

LESTER

Van, I'm coming right back, I swear to God.

VAN

No, Lester, don't—

LESTER beelines off, still holding RHYS.

VAN chases after him.

EVIE-JUNE

Jesus Christ, I'ma call down to Minnie.

EVIE-JUNE runs into the house and dials the phone.

MARGARET

I just wanna rest my head...

(looking up at the sky like VAN before her)

You not gon' give me not one break?

Can't wait to get out of this mess of red dirt and trailer trash.

(walking in the house; to EVIE-JUNE)

If Minnie don't work, try down there to Bryant. All them boys oughta be able to overpower Lester.

Lights down.

III

VAN is walking back to the house with RHYS in her arms.

She walks into the kitchen where EVIE-JUNE and MARGARET are waiting.

EVIE-JUNE

Thank God. How'd you get him?

VAN

Bryant and them got hold of Lester and had to doggone-near tear the boy from out his arms.

EVIE-JUNE

I don't know what got into him.

MARGARET

I don't even think he had a chance to drink or nothing.

EVIE-JUNE

He probably did something before he came over here.

MARGARET

But still, that look in his eyes? I don't trust Lester a lot of the time, but I ain't never been afraid of him.

EVIE-JUNE

Lester is harmless. You get that thought from out your head right now.

VAN

Uh, y'all, I think Rhys is warm?

MARGARET

What like he didn't need a jacket?

VAN

No, I think he's running a temperature.

EVIE-JUNE

Let me see.

She presses her palm to his forehead. She nods yes.

VAN

This 'bout the last thing I need in the whole world right now.

EVIE-JUNE

The boy got a fever just that fast?

MARGARET

You need to carry that child to the hospital.

EVIE-JUNE

What hospital?

MARGARET

The one right there in Allendale.

EVIE-JUNE

Vanessa Ellis, don't you take this boy to no hospital in Allendale.

MARGARET

Ma, please, the boy sick. Van: take – the – child.

EVIE-JUNE

It ain't nothing but a fever. Minnie used to get those.

MARGARET

That's what we think it is. The fever could just be a symptom for something else is what I'm saying, Mama.

EVIE-JUNE

And what about insurance?

MARGARET

A funeral cost just as much as a hospital bill.

EVIE-JUNE

Mag, that's not funny!

MARGARET

I wasn't being funny. Van, wouldn't you rather be safe than sorry?

VAN

Rhys, you feel like you need to see the doctor?

MARGARET

Vanessa, tell me you did not just ask your child if *he* thinks he should go to the doctor or not.

VAN

He's had fevers before.

(to RHYS)

Rhys, you don't feel good?

(he nods)

You don't feel good like it feels new or you don't feel good like you ain't feel good before?

MARGARET

Mama, if she don't know how sick the boy is—

EVIE-JUNE

Well, first of all, unless he got a reason to be standing up, you need to make sure he laying down somewhere and make sure he covered.

You know what? Before we lay him down, let's try and cut the fever.

VAN

How would we do that?

EVIE-JUNE

Mag, it's Epsom salt left in there?

MARGARET

It should be. I ain't used any.

EVIE-JUNE reaches into one of the cabinets and gets the Epsom salt.

EVIE-JUNE

Alright, come on Van, let's run the boy a bath.

RHYS squirms at the sound of the word "bath."

VAN and EVIE-JUNE exit down the bedroom hall.

The sound of a bath being drawn.

BONEY knocks on the front door and enters before he can get a response.

BONEY

How's Van doing? She shaken up?

MARGARET

She's fine. The boy seem like he caught something.

BONEY

Shame.

MARGARET

What you doing here?

BONEY

Just wanted to check on Van.

MARGARET

She alright. Her and Evie-June in there setting a Epsom salt bath for Rhys.

BONEY

They not gon' make him eat Epsom salt, are they?

MARGARET

You know your grandmother and you know that they are.

BONEY

Chewing on Epsom salt done become something like a rite of passage.

MARGARET

If you ask me, every kid is at least a little sick until age fifteen. So when a kid gets *sick*-sick, I think it's a proper cause for concern.

BONEY

They not gon' let nothing happen to that boy.

MARGARET

Not intentionally. But good intentions is a poor medicine.

BONEY

You know Lester tried to solicit me into doing deliveries with him. I think he got good intentions but—

MARGARET

Oh. That sounds nice I guess.

BONEY

Really? Nice? With Lester?

MARGARET

You boys used to be so close—thick as thieves—when you was growing up.

BONEY

So you would be okay with me doing these “deliveries”?

MARGARET

What would y'all be delivering?

BONEY

Don't even know.

MARGARET

Well you just keep your wits about you.

BONEY

That's it?

MARGARET

What else do you want me to say? What am I saying wrong this time? I'm always saying something wrong when it come to you and your sister in there.

BONEY

Why you don't never try and stop me from doing nothing?

MARGARET

You stopped listening to me so long ago, why would I waste my breath?

BONEY

So you feel it would be wasting your breath?

MARGARET

You feel it wouldn't be? I only got but so much breath, you want me to spend what little I got left on deaf ears?

BONEY

Deaf not the same as hard of hearing.

MARGARET

It feel the same from where I'm shouting. Enlighten me, Boney: what's the difference?

BONEY

Hard of hearing folks like to hear the music sometimes. Even deaf folks like to feel it.

MARGARET

Well, you best find you another bandmaster to chase after and solicit because this one? This one is far too tired to keep up with you.

BONEY

But not too tired to keep up with Van though?

MARGARET

Van been on her job for seventeen years, Van got a son what need raising, Van do what I need her to do when I need her to do it. You and Van are *not* the same.

BONEY

What happened to the mother who said she would never pick favorites?

MARGARET

Her kids grew up; she got bored of keeping secrets.

BONEY

I'll leave you to your honesty, then. Goodnight moon, goodnight mama, and goodnight my mama secrets.

MARGARET

Where you going, Boney? It's late.

BONEY

A walk. Just need to think about some things.

MARGARET

You not mad at me, are you? Boney?

BONEY exits, walking off into the wing.

MARGARET goes to lock the screen door.

She spots LESTER approaching in the distance and steps out to meet him.

She sits in one of the chairs.

LESTER stops in his tracks.

MARGARET

Cove over here and sit down.

MARGARET slaps the seat of the chair next to her.

LESTER

You sure you want to sit next to me? Seem like everybody upset with me.

MARGARET

Lester, what did I say? I ain't got time to sit here and watch you play at being sheepish.

LESTER climbs the steps and sits with MARGARET.

MARGARET

What's going on? No ranting, no showboating. Sit down here and have a conversation with me. What's going on?

Beat.

LESTER

Did you know Denise took my boys from me, Aunt Mag?

MARGARET

Both of 'em?

LESTER

All two of 'em, yes ma'am.

MARGARET

Is that why you wanted to hold onto Rhys like that?

He shrugs and half nods "yes".

MARGARET

That boy wasn't never gonna be your son.

LESTER

I know, but Aunt Mag, it's something about knowing you might not never see your boys again; that get into your head and make you not yourself.

MARGARET

You can't let your past scar your person. You still the same Lester. Maybe more wise, more learned, but basically the same man.

LESTER

What if I don't want to be that man no more?

MARGARET

You always gon' be some version of that man.

LESTER

That man made mistakes. I don't want people to see me as the sum of all his mistakes.

MARGARET

Maybe, but people gon' see what they want to see anyway.

LESTER

If I had a dollar to my name, I could make 'em see what I want 'em to see.

MARGARET

That's what you think?

LESTER

That's what I think because it's true.

MARGARET

No, it's not. Lester, whether you got ten cents or ten million, people gon' read you how they see fit to read you and it's nothing you can do about that.

LESTER

But I don't want to be that man that people see as his mistakes.

MARGARET

Then give those people some evidence that the *man* changed, not his bank account.

LESTER

What if I haven't changed?

MARGARET

Pretend.

LESTER

I could pretend...

MARGARET

What's this I hear about deliveries?

LESTER

Oh that? That's nothing.

MARGARET

Don't get yourself into no more trouble than you need to be in.

LESTER

Don't no one ever plan on getting into trouble. The trouble part just kinda happens.

MARGARET

Then you don't put yourself in no position where the trouble can "just happen."

LESTER

How'd you make it, Aunt Mag?

MARGARET

I looked at the resources God and life saw fit to give me and I learned myself how to make do with that. I ain't go 'bout bothering how to chase the next man's resources.

LESTER

You ain't got to bother 'bout the next man if you become him.

MARGARET

Ain't no worth in that if you lose yourself along the way. The man that God made you to be, the man that Minnie raised you to be, the man sitting by me that I see as decent?—that man be good as dead then.

LESTER

People so fearful of dying. I'd sooner die than live without no kinda respect.

MARGARET

You got a whole lotta pride, don't you, Lester?

LESTER

I got my pride and my convictions, yes.

MARGARET

That kinda pride served you well while you was where you was for five years. That kinda pride not gon' serve you out here. That kinda pride not gon' serve inside of a family—*that's* way Denise took your boys from you Fool Lester.

It's your pride, it's a dangerous pride to be close to. Learn some humility to give yourself a fighting chance. Everybody gotta humble theyself to wrestle with the world. And sometimes that means knowing you can't ask no one for help. But other times—for other people—that means knowing when you have to. It's a time when everyone got to ask for help. I pray every night; that's how Aunt Mag ask for help. But if you not asking it of God, make sure you know how to ask it of man.

You hearing me?

LESTER nods yes.

MARGARET

Good.

'Cause the secret I learned, Lester, is that a helped man always got a future in this country. But unless he born into it, he gotta learn how to ask for it. Gotta pay it back too. Help is as help does. Fool is as fool does. You might be "Fool Lester" until the day you die, but you ain't gotta be no fool.

God ain't make you to be no fool—my sister Minnie? Ain't raise her boy to be no fool. The man sitting in front of me right now—I could see it in his eyes—that man ain't no fool. Don't make him into one. Ambition can make a man, but it could just as easily break him, okay? Careful your ambition stay a virtue and it don't become a vice.

MARGARET gets up.

MARGARET

Now, I'm going to bed and I advise you find somewhere to rest your head as well. Maybe walk down there to your mama house.

LESTER

I'm not gon' stay with Minnie.

MARGARET

Who you calling "Minnie?" That's your mother, boy.

LESTER

As long as I been around, Aunt Mag—all forty one years—she been fool Lester mother. I don't want the word fool anywhere near my mother name. She don't deserve that. And I'm not too keen on asking not one more person for one more favor, Aunt Mag; I done spent my favors. If I'm gon' do this right, I'm gon' do it on my own.

MARGARET

You ain't heard what I said about asking for help?

LESTER

Maybe I'll finally learn how to ask God.

MARGARET

I hope you learn how to ask somebody. 'Cause if you don't learn how to ask God and you don't learn to ask yo' family, that just leave you a helpless man Lester.

LESTER

I'm a self-sufficient man, Aunt Mag. I ain't scared to spend some nights in my car.

MARGARET

That's your choice to make. You should know I think that's a stupid choice to make, but it is yours to make. Goodnight, Fool Lester.

LESTER

Goodnight Aunt Mag.

MARGARET retreats back into the trailer, heads for the bedroom.

BONEY walks back into the scene.

BONEY

Lester, you know I can't do these deliveries with you, right?

LESTER

I'm not gon' do those deliveries, Boney.

BONEY

Well, shit, fool: who knocked you upside your head to have you thinking straight?

LESTER

Listen, I still got my pride and I still got my convictions. I just wanna do right. And well, shit fool, you ain't slurring your words: you done drinking?

BONEY

I ain't never drank to get drunk, I just drank to feel something.

LESTER

What you feel now?

BONEY

Different. What you gon' do now if it ain't delivering?

LESTER

You know I'm always gon' put a dollar in my pocket. I'm thinking—

BONEY

You know what? Don't tell me.

LESTER

Nigga, what you mean don't tell you? You gon' ask me a question and not let me answer the question?

BONEY

Tell me in the morning. If you got something worth telling me—a truth worth selling me—tell it to me in the morning.

LESTER

So that's a deal? You'll hear me out in the morning?

BONEY

In the morning.

LESTER

Alright then, Boney.

BONEY

Where you going? You not staying with E-June?

LESTER

EJ ain't gon' let me stay with her. I'ma crash in my car.

BONEY

Don't do nothing stupid like that Lester, ask your mama Minnie if you could stay with her.

LESTER

I'm tired of asking to come and go. If I gotta take my freedom cold, Boney, I'ma take it cold. I ain't afraid to sleep in my car.

BONEY

You just gon' wake up with sense enough to realize I'm right.

LESTER

You ain't had no good idea in your life. But me? I'm gon' have a pitch for you in the morning.

BONEY

According to your Aunt, I'm as good as deaf, but my ears'll be sober and ready come sunrise.

LESTER

Goodnight, Booney.

LESTER starts out.

BONEY

Hey! You a good man Lester Wilks.

LESTER

I see where you trying to be better today for tomorrow.

BONEY

Nah, I'm trying to be better today for today.

LESTER

(laughs at him; teasing)

Boy, if you don't hang on every word your sister say...

LESTER exits.

EVIE-JUNE enters the kitchen with the Epsom salt. She puts it up.

BONEY sees her through the screen and knocks.

She hesitates, then opens it for him.

BONEY

I know what you said earlier and I don't mean no disrespect, but...

EVIE-JUNE

What you need Boney?

BONEY

It just occurred to me that I was wanting to check on Van and I never actually seen how she was.

EVIE-JUNE

Now is not the best time.

BONEY

Okay. Well, uh, you could open your fridge. It's no more booze in there.

EVIE-JUNE

You threw it out?

He shrugs.

EVIE-JUNE

Good. You don't need to be drinking like you be drinking.

BONEY

I don't mean to, Nana, I really don't. But it give me a kind of comfort.

EVIE-JUNE

Everybody got they vice.

BONEY

Exactly, right? I ain't no different.

EVIE-JUNE

The thing about a vice is that it don't help you carry nothing; it just help you not notice you dropping all the things it was important to you to hold on to. It don't change whether or not you drop 'em.

BONEY

Right. Well, tell Van I came looking for her and I'll check back in—

APD sirens go off in front of the trailer.

BONEY

What that is?

EVIE-JUNE

Sound like APD.

LESTER (OFF)

No! No! I didn't do nothing! I told y'all – this exactly what they do, this exactly what they did last time!!

MARGARET runs out.

VAN does too, carrying RHYS in a towel.

BONEY

Oh shit, no!

BONEY runs out through the front.

Lights down.

IV

Everyone is still stunned.

BONEY steps in through the front.

BONEY

Violated his parole they said.

MARGARET

Since when Allendale police actually arrest somebody violating they parole?

EVIE-JUNE

Since they saw it was fool Lester on the fifth of July.

MARGARET

Man ain't even had time enough to look where he was going before they jumped on him and said he was going the wrong way.

EVIE-JUNE

Guess APD figure he shoulda known the right way to go blind.

VAN

Is his car still out there?

VAN tries to look through the front windows to see if she can see LESTER's car.

BONEY

It's still out there.

MARGARET

You ain't worried 'bout Lester?

VAN

I ain't never seen no one knocked on they back so much as I seen Fool Lester knocked on his back. I also ain't never seen somebody get up as much times as him.

MARGARET

Still. A moment of mourning the man's freedom.

VAN

I want to grant him my moment of mourning from a distance, from the comfort of my own home.

MARGARET

What all is in your home that you rushing to get back to?

VAN

I got to build a whole new life for myself and for my son from scratch. I don't mean no offense by it, but I gotta do that from the comfort of my own home. Plus I got work and if I don't have George to watch after him, I'm gonna have to sign him up last-minute at a summer camp. Unless you, for whatever reason you want to...

MARGARET

No, you right. You best find him a summer camp to go to.

EVIE-JUNE

Are Bryant and them still out there?

VAN looks.

VAN

I don't see them.

BONEY

Probably scattered as soon as they heard the sirens.

VAN

You think fool Lester left his keys in the car?

MARGARET

Give it a rest.

VAN

If I get those keys, me and Rhys could still make the train on time.

MARGARET

There's other trains, you know.

BONEY slips out.

EVIE-JUNE

I'm gonna go on to bed. Someone gotta get up in the morning and go with Minnie down to the station.

VAN

Goodnight Nana.

MARGARET

Goodnight, Ma.

EVIE-JUNE waves them off as she retreats to her bedroom.

VAN

Why are you mad at me for trying to get home?

MARGARET

I'm not mad at you for trying, I just don't like the way you going about it. You gon' just get on this train in the middle of the night?

VAN

We'll get home at a normal hour, I just wanna lay in my own bed. And put my son to bed something proper for the first time in weeks.

I don't know what tomorrow bring—I don't know where in the world George is—but I know today very intimately. I have spent thirty eight years of my life in the company of todays. My partnership with George; if all I got out of that first partnership was Rhys, it was worth it. But I got a second partnership—the one between today and myself—it gotta offer a whole lot more in order to square right with me. What's that that Pastor say? "Don't be anxious 'bout tomorrow, tomorrow anxious 'bout itself; be anxious 'bout today, today got its own trouble."?

The way I see it, the only trouble today got is it got to square right with me. 'Cause if it don't, I'ma come for it and I'ma squash it, I'ma snuff it out and I'ma swallow it. And I'll quiet it like the sea. Everyday will be yesterday or tomorrow; no more todays.

MARGARET

Everybody so worried 'bout they pains from the past, you be careful you don't get no scars from the future either, alright?

VAN

What's one scar to a thousand other ones? I remember when you first showed me your kidhood scar on your arm and you told me how Nana showed you her scar and you said how it's no way of knowing when a scar is gonna come or how long it's gonna stay for. I got me a big, big scar today. Bigger than any other I got. My scars live on my skin like yours on you or Nana's on Nana and that's just the truth of us in the world. Now Rhys is a boy, so I don't know if he'll understand my scars. For that reason, I gotta keep them hidden from him until I know whether he can appreciate them or not. But you ain't got to fight and claw for your respect like it's only but so much of it to go around. It don't matter if I'm in Allendale, Sycamore, Flatbush; we all citizens of the same city. Scar City stretch for as far as the plains do and ain't no escaping it. Even on a Amtrak redeye.

I'll see you when you get home. And you know what, Ma? I do respect you.

BONEY reenters with a paper bag.

BONEY

Howdy.

MARGARET

Boney, you wasn't driving that car, was you?

BONEY

Yeah, I was driving it. I'm supposed to sit in the car and wait for it to take me places on its own?

MARGARET

You know I can't get with no drunk-driving.

BONEY

Who drunk? I don't drink to get drunk, I drink to feel something. Soon as I feel a little something, I stop with my drinking.

MARGARET

It's a whole lot of them little bottles you put back.

BONEY

And it's a whole lot of a whole lotta things I want to put behind me. I'm good and sobered up now.

VAN

Where you been?

BONEY

Me? I been to the 24-hour store right up the road.

BONEY reveals a small bottle of Pepsi soda.

VAN

Boney, you a fool.

BONEY

Fool two. I been a fool, I'm not trying to be a fool no more.

VAN

Could I ask you a favor?

BONEY

Ain't I just handed you a favor?

VAN

Nice as it was, I ain't never ask you for no Pepsi. That's more a gift than a favor.

BONEY

What's the favor, then?

VAN

Could you carry me and Rhys to the station? We got a early train.

BONEY

How early is early?

MARGARET

Like damn-near-right-now early.

BONEY

Sound like y'all best get ready a hour ago. We don't know what traffic gon' be like.

VAN

It's not exactly rush hour.

BONEY

It's the end of a holiday. Everybody rushing to get from they family.

VAN

That sound nice, but—

BONEY

You wanna get there late and miss your train or get there early and have time to kill?

VAN

I'll meet you in the car.

MARGARET

So you not gon' take that boy to the hospital then?

VAN

The fever broke.

MARGARET

Wouldn't you rather be safe than sorry?

VAN

Are you trying to keep me here with you?

MARGARET

No, of course not, I just want to be sure you're considering—

VAN

I've considered it all.

MARGARET

Why you don't listen to me no more?

VAN

Ma—

BONEY

Van, rush hour.

VAN

I'll be back.

VAN exits to the bedrooms.

BONEY

That's your favorite, huh? Do what you need her to do when you need it done?

MARGARET

This mess with you and with Lester probably got her all mixed up.

BONEY

Or maybe she's coming into her own. Like all people do.

MARGARET

That girl ain't even got a "her own" to come into.

BONEY

You know the sooner you let her go, the sooner she'll come back.

MARGARET

Who said I want her to come back?

BONEY

You want somebody to come back.

MARGARET

Everybody want somebody to come back.

BONEY

And your somebody, at least right now, is Van.

MARGARET

Ain't no good if I'm not hers.

BONEY

No, hers is probably George. Secretly. And it may not stay George for long, but to pretend that it isn't him in the first place? That would be unfair to Van.

MARGARET

What is this big brother routine? What do you get out of this?

BONEY

Nothing.

MARGARET

I known you all your life and it's not nothing you ever did unless you felt like you could get something out of it.

BONEY

I just think it's a good step. To becoming the version of me I want to be. The version of me that people feel could be depended on.

MARGARET

You waiting on me to tell you I'm proud of you?

BONEY

I stopped waiting a long time ago.

MARGARET

I want to be proud of you, though, you know that, right?

BONEY

Sure.

MARGARET

I want to be proud of all of you.

BONEY

We made it all to adults. That itself oughta be good enough for you to say you proud of us.

MARGARET

It oughta be.

BONEY

But it isn't.

MARGARET

If I don't feel it, I just don't feel it.

BONEY

What if that's more about you than it is about us?

VAN re-enters. Bags and RHYS in tow.

BONEY

Dag, girl, how fast you could get ready?

VAN

Real fast when there's a train we stand to miss.

BONEY

Alright, well come on then. You ready?

RHYS

Wait—

RHYS crosses and gives MARGARET a hug.
She's not sure how to receive this. She's not used
to this.

Then RHYS runs over to BONEY.

RHYS

Now I'm ready.

BONEY heads out first, then RHYS, holding his
hand.

Last is VAN carrying the bags...

MARGARET

Van?

VAN

Yes, Ma?

MARGARET

You gon' be alright. Don't mistake your stretch marks for scars.

VAN nods.

MARGARET nods back.

VAN leaves. The door shuts behind her.

The car starts. And then it's off.

MARGARET gets up and starts cutting off lights.

She looks out the window at the car driving away.

MARGARET

Goodnight, Van. I *am* proud of you.

She turns off the last light.

Blackout.

End of Play.